CORONET

Sport for The Baron

John Creasey

as Anthony Morton

The Baron tangles with a millionaire Australian client – and faces professional ruin

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He slowed down and made himself think deliberately. Undoubtedly that was a vicious write-up, almost as if someone wanted to stick a knife in his back, but even if the facts – *facts*, remember – were related in a different way and without the vitriolic pen, the same impression would emerge, that he had betrayed much more than the Australian – he had betrayed a client's trust. And trust in his particular business was as vital as the air he breathed.

By far the worst feature of the article was the imputation that by his failure he had lost the Estate a large sum of money.
And he *had*. Had he done what Brutus had told him, the Estate would have benefited by at least another twenty-five thousand pounds. No one could blame the beneficiaries for censuring him, for accusing him. It did not matter which way he looked at the situation, it seemed to get worse.

Had Lorna foreseen these consequences?

In any case, why hadn't he?

If it came to that, why hadn't he made that bid?

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Sport for the Baron

John Creasey
as Anthony Morton

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CONTENTS

		Page
1	"HEY, SPORT"	7
2	MILLIONAIRE OR WINDBAG?	15
3	THE DISAPPOINTED BIDDER	24
4	MISTRUST	32
5	FLIGHT 701	40
6	RIVERSIDE	48
7	"STUCK WITH IT"	57
8	FLIGHT	65
9	"GO HOME"	74
10	LOVE OR HATE?	82
11	QUICK WORK	93
12	PREVIEW	101
13	CRACK OF THE WHIP	109
14	SURPRISE, SURPRISE	119
15	"WHAT BROUGHT YOU?"	126
16	THE PORTRAIT	134
17	THE PICASSO	142
18	MIRACLE	151

CHAPTER ONE

"HEY, SPORT"

The man stood in Hart Row, that narrow, quaint and picturesque street in the heart of Mayfair, and looked in the window of Quinn's. It was as if today had burst rudely into yesterday. The man said nothing, but stared at the jewels displayed on rich black velvet, some of the most beautiful jewels in the world, as well as some of the most ancient and historic. As he watched, the scintillations from the gems caught his bright blue eyes; eyes which in a woman would be called beautiful. In a strange way, although he was both still and silent, he gave an impression of perpetual motion.

The man was not particularly tall nor broad, but he was young and there was a wiry strength about him. He wore a creased grey suit, and a pink shirt. The suit was too small for him, and consequently, his hands looked larger than they would otherwise have done. His feet did, too, partly because the trousers were too short, partly because his new, size eight brown shoes had enormous crêpe-rubber soles. As his gaze darted from jewel to jewel, his lips worked as if he were talking excitedly to himself.

Suddenly, he pushed open the door of Quinn's and went in. A thin sliver of morning sunlight streamed before him, although sunlight had no place in this long, shadowed holy of holies where highly-polished walnut and cherry-wood, mahogany and oak, gleamed in lights half-concealed by ancient beams and uneven walls. On either side were showcases containing silver and gold, jewels and miniatures, from Europe and the Orient, each precious in antiquity, most of

them beautiful. On the walls were mirrors, their frames gilded, jewel-encrusted, enamelled. There were also paintings, on panels and on canvas, all old, all worthy of any wall, none suffering in comparison with the Vermeer and the Titian which were allotted large spaces to themselves.

The door swung to behind the man.

He did not know that he had locked himself in, and could only get out if one of the three men in Quinn's pressed a concealed control. Nor did he know that he had been closely observed since he had appeared at the window and that the sound of his footsteps had come clearly into Quinn's through a loud-speaker which made it possible to overhear everything within a certain vicinity. Thieves, talking together, often had cause to regret their last-minute exchanges, and this self-locking device and the loud-speaker equipment had prevented many a daytime raid on this renowned antique shop.

At that time, the antiques, the jewels and the *objets d'art* in Quinn's had a value of over a million pounds; no company would accept the risk of insurance without knowing that extreme precautions were taken.

Now, two men, one old and grey, one young and sleek, both immaculate in dark suits and stiff white collars, converged on the man who had just entered, while a third stood some distance off, watchful and wary.

The caller's features were subdued by the shadows, but nothing could subdue his eyes. He turned to the older, more authoritative man:

"Hey, sport. How much for the stuff in the window?"

There was a moment of almost shocked silence before the grey-haired man smiled and the younger slowly relaxed. Quinn's, though accorded an almost sacred convention, was not sacrosanct, and this visitor's voice had a vitality which

gave the impression that whatever he wanted, he took for granted he could get.

"What's funny?" he demanded.

The older man, Larraby the manager, answered without hesitation.

"It isn't customary to refer to such jewels as 'stuff', sir."

"O.K., sport. How much are those *jewels* in the window?"

"I'm afraid no price has been set upon them," Larraby answered.

"Don't give me that," the man said in annoyance. "This is a shop, isn't it?"

"It is indeed, sir."

"And those goods are in the shop window."

"They are on display prior to auction," Larraby informed him. "They are part of the late Duke of Alda's insignia, and the Duke was a friend of Mr. Mannering."

The stranger's eyes flashed his question before his lips uttered it.

"Who is Mannering?"

"The owner of Quinn's, sir."

"What's Quinn's, sport?"

"This establish — this shop, sir."

The inquisitive visitor frowned, so that his eyes lost a little of their brightness, but for an instant only. The next moment he threw back his head and gave a deep roar of laughter, and such was the nature of the man that obviously he was laughing at himself. He shifted backward a little, and leaned against a bow-shaped Queen Anne dressing-table, also part of the Duke of Alda's estate; a dozen duchesses had sat in front of that dressing-table and preened themselves in the small wing mirror which stood on top of it.

"So I can't read," the caller said, and the laughter died away into a chuckle. "This Mannering, sport."

"Yes?"

"Is he in?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Can't you find out?"

"Very quickly, sir, but I myself may be able to give you any information you require."

"Not a hope," said the visitor. "I want to know the price of those jewels in the window."

Larraby hesitated, glanced at the nearby assistant, looked back at the caller, and asked:

"I will find out if Mr. Mannering is in, sir. What is your name, please?"

"Brutus."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You got it right, sport. Brutus. Think of Caesar."

Larraby looked at him pensively, then smiled almost deprecatingly, turned away and said: "I won't keep you long, Mr. Brutus." He walked sedately the length of the long passage, carpeted with Persian runners of great price, and disappeared behind what appeared to be a partition. This partition was in fact the back of a Welsh dresser which some said had once graced Harlech Castle. Behind it, on the flat dresser surface, were papers, telephones, reference books and files. On the right was a narrow doorway, beautifully arched, of centuries old oak. This door was closed. Larraby picked up a telephone, and said quietly:

"I am sorry to worry you, sir."

"That's all right, Josh," a man responded. "What is it?"

"May I come in?"

"Yes," said John Mannering, into his telephone. "In one minute."

He was in a small office, approached through the doorway, standing by an opening in the floor in the corner

diagonally opposite the door. A flight of concrete steps led down from this opening, which was about a yard square, to the strong rooms beneath; there most of Quinn's most valuable stock was housed. Mannering had just been down to these strong-rooms to put away a set of Thai masks. Now, he moved a book on a shelf above the opening, and pressed a spot on the wall beyond it. A faint whirring sound followed and the opening began to grow smaller, as a section of the floor itself moved. In a few seconds it had disappeared, and it was almost impossible to see the joins. Mannering kicked a rich Mysore carpet into position, for further concealment, and stepped to his Queen Anne desk, bow-shaped, like the Alda dressing table. He pressed a button beneath the edge of the desk, and there was a faint click. Almost at once the arched door opened, and Larraby came in.

"Hallo, Josh," Mannering said. "Who's out there?"

"A Mr. Brutus, sir," said Larraby. "From Australia, I believe."

Mannering frowned.

"Do we know him?"

"No, and some might say that we may not wish to," said Larraby.

"A rough diamond, is he?" Mannering mused.

"I think he's rather intriguing," Larraby ventured. He had a gentle voice and a persuasive manner. "He wishes to know the price of the 'stuff' in the window."

This created the sensation he had expected. *"Stuff!"* echoed Mannering, and he reacted as Larraby himself had reacted earlier: he smiled. Laughter crinkled the corners of his eyes, which were hazel in colour, and made his strong face even more handsome than it was in repose. He was over six feet in height, lean, fit-looking, very well-proportioned.

"What did you tell him?" he asked.

"The truth, sir."

"And he still isn't satisfied?"

"No."

"What do you make of him?"

"If I passed him in the street I would guess he was from a country of wide open spaces, who had managed to scrape up enough money to come here steerage."

"Oh," said Mannering, and he sat down. "Have all the precautions been taken?"

"Naturally, sir. He came by himself. We would know by now if anyone had followed him."

"So you think he's genuinely interested."

"I think he may be a little short on top in the most harmless way, sir."

"I'll come and see him," decided John Mannering.

Larraby raised a pale hand in a form of protest.

"Lady Bannington-Evans is due in five minutes or so, sir, and I promised to show her the Westphalian silver. If you could see Mr. Brutus in here . . ."

When 'Mr. Brutus' entered the office, Mannering understood exactly what Larraby had meant. This man's eyes had a clarity which hinted at the simplicity of the adult male whose mind was not fully, or perhaps conventionally, developed. A child's eyes. But their appearance could well be misleading, and Mannering found it possible to imagine that laughter lurked in those bright blue depths.

Larraby murmured: "Mr. Brutus, sir," and went out, closing the door.

Mannering moved forward, hand held out, aware of the long appraisal of those remarkable eyes, aware of the possibility that he was being laughed at. Brutus raised his own

hand very slowly, took Mannering's, and gave it a long, hard squeeze.

"Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Come and sit down." Mannering pointed to a chair, marvelled at the flawlessness, the deep even tan, of Brutus's complexion. His features were sharp, his face thin, almost lantern-jawed. Given more flesh, he would be as handsome in a clear-cut way as Mannering. His hair was lank and straw-coloured; brushed straight back from a high forehead. Mannering did not agree with Larraby on one count; whatever else, this man was not simple-minded. He was probably unsophisticated, even naive; but he was certainly no fool.

"You're interested in the Alda insignia?" Mannering said.

"I'm interested in the jewels in the window," corrected Brutus.

"That's the same thing," Mannering told him.

Brutus did not actually say that he disbelieved him, but looked sceptical.

"How much will they fetch at the auction?" he inquired.

"That's anybody's guess, but at least half a-million pounds Australian."

Brutus smiled broadly, showing good teeth.

"So you've placed me, Mr. Mannering."

"I think I know which part of the world you've come from."

"If you say I've come from the best country in the world I won't argue with you." Brutus paused. "Half-a-million Australian." He seemed to sing the words. "Can you sell them before the auction?"

"No."

"Isn't there a reserve?"

Any suspicion that Brutus might be simple or even ingenuous was removed even further from Mannering's

mind; but in another respect he had the same impression as the men in the shop: that whatever this man wanted, he set out to obtain.

"Yes," Mannering said.

"So if someone offered ten per cent above the reserve, why wouldn't you sell?"

Mannering hesitated, laughed, picked up a cigarette-box and offered it.

"Don't use 'em," said Brutus.

Mannering looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Are you proposing to offer ten per cent above the reserve for those jewels, Mr. Brutus?"

Brutus grinned very broadly and unexpectedly; now Mannering was almost certain he was being laughed at.

"So you're calling my bluff, sport."

"That is so," Mannering agreed mildly.

"Yes," said Brutus.

"Yes what?"

"Those jewels are real beauts," declared Brutus; he might have been talking about black eyes. "If you guarantee they're gen-u-ine, I offer the reserve plus ten." He grinned again, obviously enjoying himself. Mannering had some difficulty in concealing a slight feeling of discomfiture, even embarrassment. "Now you call my bluff again, sport. Ask me if I've got the money."

A long, prolonged silence followed in the small office; the office which had seen so many remarkable deals, deals including a sale of a million pounds-worth of jewellery and *objets d'art*, completed in five minutes.

Quietly, Mannering broke the silence.

"If you have the money, Mr. Brutus, my strong advice is that you hold on to it and do not spend it on the Alda insignia."

At least he had the satisfaction of seeing this self-possessed young man taken aback. The light faded from Brutus's eyes for a moment, and he appeared to be puzzled. It was a long time before he answered—time in which Larraby and his assistants were showing Lady Bannington Evans some beautiful hand-wrought silver in the shop which seemed almost, to the two protagonists, a thousand miles away.

Brutus's frown faded, and he asked quite matter-of factly: "Just give me one good reason for holding onto my dough, sport. Then I'll tell you whether I've got enough to pay for the stuff in the window."

CHAPTER TWO

MILLIONAIRE OR WINDBAG?

MANNERING was no longer in doubt; Brutus had been laughing at him all the time; something in his, Mannering's, manner, something at Quinn's, amused the bright-eyed Australian. It was even possible that he had come here simply for a practical joke, for Australians loved ribbing. One other thing was certain to him, as to Larraby; there was some very likeable quality in Brutus.

Mannering glanced at his watch; it was nearly four o'clock. He lifted the telephone and ordered tea and cakes. Then putting down the receiver he waited, as before, for comment, but Brutus was obviously prepared to outstare and outwait him.

"One question," he went on at last.

"You ask and I'll answer."

"Is Brutus your real name?"

The Australian wrinkled his nose.

"Don't blame me, but my given name is Nathaniel Brutus."

"Don't you think your parents did well by you in that?" asked Mannering.

Brutus now placed a finger along the side of his nose, a gesture which gave him a markedly different appearance, as if his face was slightly askew. He was given to silences, and had a trick of waiting until the pause became almost unbearable before breaking it. Just as Mannering began to feel impatient, Brutus said:

"Don't blame my ma and pa, they didn't give me the name." He paused. "They didn't give me any name." He paused again: "The orphanage, that's who you have to blame for it."

Mannering thought: I'll have to be careful, I'm getting deeper and deeper into what could be very awkward. He was quite sure that any conventional condolence or comment would win no favour, so he said:

"Why Nathaniel?"

"The warden's name was Nat."

"Why Brutus?"

"The warden knew all about things like the Roman Empire and Shakespeare and eh too."

Mannering was almost lured into exclaiming, *"eh what?"* Brutus's eyes were sparkling with silent laughter, and he took his finger away from his nose. "Eh too," he repeated. *"Et tu, Brutus."*

Mannering gave a little spontaneous chuckle.

"The warden obviously taught you well."

"Too right he taught me. He was a beaut of a man, that warden. Him and his missus, both. They only had one problem, Mr. Mannering, and that was money. The lolly. The dough. They never had enough but no one spread soup

and bread further than they did. They were both beauts. Do you mind if I remind you of something?"

"What?"

"You were going to tell me why I ought to hold onto my money and not buy the insignia in the window."

"Insignia," Mannering echoed. He recovered quickly, and went on: "You've just answered your own question."

"How's that?" Brutus looked puzzled again, and his eyes opened wide.

"Because it is insignia," Mannering said.

"So that's a reason for me not to buy?"

"The insignia's worth the half-million pounds or so because of its history, the tradition attached to each piece of the collection, the way in which it was gathered, over a period of ten centuries." When Brutus made no comment, Mannering went on: "It's worth the money to a collector but if the jewels were taken out of their settings and sold as individual stones they would be lucky to fetch two hundred and fifty thousand. Possession of it, the very fact of ownership is the reason for its selling value. There will be multi-millionaires from the United States, South America, South Africa and several parts of Europe at Catesby's tomorrow. Money doesn't really matter to such people, and they might easily spend three hundred thousand pounds simply for the privilege of possessing something unique."

Mannering stopped, determined to wait until Brutus answered this. He waited for a long time, and began to wonder whether he was simply allowing the man to lead him up the garden path. Half a-million pounds? He might not have five hundred to bless himself with.

Brutus said: "How do you know I wouldn't want to buy some tradition, too?"

Mannering shrugged, but said nothing. Brutus gave his bright yet slightly undefinable smile, and went on without a change of tone.

"I haven't got half-a-million pounds, sport." He paused again, as if inviting a sharp retort from Mannering, but when it wasn't forthcoming, he went on: "But I've got a million sheep."

Mannering looked up sharply.

"That's a lot of sheep."

"You can say that again. It's a million sheep."

"Then you must have land to go with them."

"Yes, sir, I have half-a-million acres of land in New South Wales and Queensland. It's no good for big herds of cattle and, allowing for a few roos and dingoes, all you can find on that land is sheep. Two years ago —" Brutus leaned forward, placing both lean golden tanned hands on the desk — "two years ago we had *rain*. Yes, sir, we had rain. And I had me some ideas about catchments and water-preservation. So when I want it I've got water. So how about a fair exchange, sport? Half my land and sheep for all of the insignia?"

Mannering laughed.

"I almost wish I could close a deal with you."

"Why can't you?"

"Executors have their rights. I'm simply displaying the jewels and handling some of the smaller pieces of furniture — those with a fairly predictable value. By five o'clock tonight the window will be empty, by ten o'clock tomorrow the jewels will be in Catesby's showrooms. I'm afraid it's as simple as that."

After twenty seconds, Brutus asked: "Will you be at the sale?"

"Yes."

"Buying for yourself?"

"Yes."

"How about buying for me?" asked Brutus.

Mannering was glad there was a tap at the door at that moment, for Brutus took his breath away. He called, "Come in" and the door was opened by one of the younger assistants who brought in a tea-tray with a dish of French pastries fetched from a shop behind Hart Row where the pastry-cook was still an artist. Mannering poured out, Brutus ate with gusto; no starving man could have given more rapt attention to his food.

Was he a millionaire in sheep? Was he a wind bag? Or *was* he a mental case, after all?

Mannering finished his second cup of tea as Brutus finished his fourth cake.

"Nearly as good as they make in Sydney," he declared with reverence. "How about it?"

"Buying for you?" asked Mannering slowly.

"Yes."

Mannering now knew exactly what he wanted to say.

"Be at Catesby's at ten-thirty tomorrow morning, with a banker's credit for as much as you are prepared to spend, and I will bid for you without fee. Will that do?"

"Sport," said Nathaniel Brutus, "you're a beaut of a man. I'll be right there at ten-thirty." He stood up, made no attempt to shake hands, reached the door and promptly turned away from it. "Just one other thing."

"What is it?" demanded Mannering.

"Will you give me the name of that pastry-cook?"

Mannering laughed with a deep enjoyment, a kind of laughter that came too seldom, and only when he was on the best of terms with the world and with himself. Nathaniel

Brutus had done him a great deal of good; even if he never saw the man again, that would be true. It was like a visit to those wide open spaces, where words were used sparingly, and for a simple purpose.

He did not expect to see Brutus next morning, but he would not be surprised if he turned up.

Could such a man own a million sheep?

The question was hardly in his mind before he picked up a telephone and dialled a friend who served as London Editor on a chain of Australian newspapers. He had to hold on. Larraby came in to report that Lady Bannington-Evans had asked that the Westphalian silver be reserved for her until the next afternoon, by which time she would have decided one way or the other.

"So of course I agreed," Larraby said.

"If she asks for another day's option tomorrow, say how sorry you are that it can't be done," Mannering said. As he finished, a man's voice spoke through the telephone. "Hallo, Harry! How much do you know about sheep in your home country?" . . . Mannering signalled to Larraby to sit down. "That's good. How common are stations with a million head of sheep? . . . What?" He almost laughed with relief. "*How* many? . . . You wouldn't know them all, would you? . . . A man named Brutus, Nathaniel Brutus . . . Northern New South Wales and Southern Queensland . . . Yes, if you will, by half-past ten . . . No, not here, at Catesby's. Thanks Harry . . . Yes, we must."

Larraby echoed: "A *million* sheep?"

"That is what your Brutus said."

"Do you know," said Larraby feelingly, "I wouldn't like to say whether I think the man is a liar. On the whole, sir, I think not."

At half-past six that night, in the small study of his Chelsea flat at the top of an old house not far from the Thames, Mannering told his wife about Nathaniel Brutus. Lorna Mannering, sitting in her favourite position on a leather pouffe, one knee bent, upright as a young girl, was obviously intrigued by his reactions. She was a strikingly handsome woman, finely built and full bosomed, with rather heavy eyebrows and a mass of dark hair only now beginning to show flecks of grey.

". . . And I can hardly wait until I know whether he'll be at Catesby's," Mannering said.

"I can hardly wait either," said Lorna.

"You? At Catesby's?"

"I have been before," Lorna remarked drily. "And a man who can make you more animated than you've been for months, I must see. A course of Nathaniel Brutus might be good for you, darling."

They had another drink, Mannering whisky and soda, Lorna Dubonnet, then a modest dinner cooked by a pleasant little woman who came in three times a week to prepare an evening meal. They looked at one good and two indifferent television programmes, and then Lorna went to bed. Mannering took down the volume *Anno* to *Baltic* of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and turned to "Australia', then volume *Sars* to *Sorc* and thumbed the pages to 'Sheep'. It was not until he was yawning over the articles and wondering whether he had really learned much that the significance of one of Lorna's remarks struck home. He had noticed it, and at the time felt a trifle peeved; now he found that he was almost resentful.

"And a man who can make you more animated than you've been for months I must see," Lorna had said. "A course of Nathaniel Brutus might be good for you, darling."

The opposite to being animated was surely to be dull.

Was he dull?

Still pondering the unpalatable aspects of the implication, Mannering went into the bathroom, studied his face for a few minutes, frowned, and then strolled to the drawing-room, long and narrow and beautiful in Regency and Louis Quinze. On one wall was a portrait which Lorna had painted of him, ten years or so ago. It was her favourite picture and in some moods, when nostalgia lay heavily and helped them to relive the earlier days of their love for each other, she would say that it pleased her above all else that she had caught the vitality and animation in him, and made it live in paint.

Was there something of the vitality of Nathaniel Brutus in that portrait? And *had* his vitality become so subdued? He wished he could say 'Nonsense' but in fairness he could not be sure.

Not until next morning did he wring some consolation out of the situation. He had slept like a top; the memory of an Australian mystery man who might own a million sheep had neither obsessed nor depressed him.

Lorna was still asleep, in the bed which touched his own. She was facing him, one shoulder and arm over the sheet, her face tucked down. She looked as peaceful as a child. After a few moments he recalled his mood of the previous night, and thought: No animation? No vitality? His manhood challenged, he pushed back the bedclothes, and slid in beside her.

She stirred . . .

"Lorna my sweet," Mannering said just after ten o'clock. "You look wonderful this morning."

"So I should hope!"

"I've never meant that more seriously," said Mannering.

She pressed his fingers, and for a moment their bodies touched.

"I know," she said. "Bless you."

They watched three dealers from America coming into Catesby's, where the jewels were now in locked show-cases. Two guards stood at each door, while others moved unobtrusively about the auction rooms, renowned throughout the world of art and antiques. From a point of vantage, Mannering counted the heads and studied the faces, then whispered: "Even if Brutus isn't here, everyone else is. I should think that every capital city and most of the big collectors are represented."

There was the inevitable buzz of anticipation, most of those present speaking English but in a dozen accents. Catalogues flapped, officials bustled, but the auctioneer's dais remained empty, the hands of a big-faced clock moving slowly forward, until it was half-past ten. Mannering looked at the door, faintly disappointed yet telling himself that he wasn't really surprised.

The chief auctioneer took his position, and there followed the conventional courtesies, the brief pleasantries. Mannering reflected idly that the fortunes of the men assembled here, when put together, could have paid off Britain's national debt.

"You didn't really expect him," Lorna said, and squeezed Mannering's arm.

"My Lords, my ladies and gentlemen . . ."

Above the chief auctioneer's voice another sounded in Mannering's ear.

"There's a Mr. Brutus to see you, sir," one of the attendants reported. "I thought I had better make sure you wished to see him."

Mannering turned his head.

Nathaniel Brutus, dressed in the shrunken grey suit he had worn yesterday, so painfully unsuitable for Catesby's, was standing in the door. In his right hand, raised high, was a large envelope. As Mannering caught sight of him he placed one finger by the side of his nose.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DISAPPOINTED BIDDER

MANNERING shifted to one side, Lorna drew closer to the wall, and Brutus sat between them, glancing at Lorna yet obviously without really seeing her. He placed the envelope in Mannering's hand, and whispered: "Open it." Mannering was aware of his intent gaze, as well as his voice, carrying an authority which made the words a command. The chief auctioneer, looking and speaking rather like a self-conscious bishop, was already offering the first item in the catalogue.

"I need not elaborate on the rarity or the flawless beauty of the first number," he was saying.

Mannering opened the letter and slid out two documents, both on the letter-heading of one of the Big Five among Britain's banks. He glanced at the signature of the first; it was like being kicked by a horse, he was so surprised, for the signature was *Renton of Way*, and beneath this was the single word: *"Chairman"*. Mannering glanced at the other letter, which was from the manager of the bank's head office in Mayfair. Each said the same thing: Nathaniel Brutus's standing at the bank enable them to extend him credit to a limit of one million pounds sterling.

Attached to the manager's letter was a passport photograph and a physical description of the Australian.

Lorna was leaning forward, trying to read the letters. Mannering handed them to her, in front of Brutus, who took notice of her for the first time. Mannering was by now so accustomed to his long, deliberate stare that he did not particularly notice Brutus's gaze fixed immovably on Lorna. She looked quite startled as she handed the bank letters back to him.

"This quite distinctive pair of Georgian inkstands . . ." the auctioneer was saying.

Mannering whispered to Brutus: "What's your limit for the insignia?"

"Six hundred thousand quid sterling."

Lorna almost choked.

"Shhh!" a man reproved.

Brutus sat back, staring at Lorna. He was sitting in the midst of this remarkable assembly, ludicrously out-of-place, yet absolutely free from self-consciousness or embarrassment. The auctioneer went on and on, the bids came thick and fast, pieces were held up or put on cabinets for display, the ritual seemed unending . . . and Brutus continued to stare at Lorna. Now and again, touched with embarrassment, she turned to give him a mechanical smile, and then caught Mannering's eye with pleading in her expression.

"Now we have the ducal insignia of the Alda family . . ."

"This is us," Mannering whispered.

At last, Brutus looked away from Lorna.

". . . *You will not need me to elaborate upon the uniqueness or the beauty of this insignia,*" the auctioneer went on. *"I would like your bids, ladies and gentlemen, if you please."*

There was silence, tense and prolonged, before a little man with a bald head said in heavily-accented English:

"One hundred tousandt pounds."

Without a pause a plump, red-faced man called quietly:

"Two hundred thousand."

"Two ten."

"Two twenty."

"Two fifty."

Brutus whispered into Lorna's ear. "It's just like the wool sales."

Lorna was jolted out of her mood to a laugh which she quickly stifled. A man shushed them again. Mannering watched the bidders, and made his guess as to the most likely men to stay the pace.

"Three fifty."

"Sixty."

"Seventy."

Mannering came in for the first time.

"Four hundred."

The auctioneer actually smiled at him.

"Thank you. I will now take bids of five thousand pounds, if you please. Four hundred thousand pounds has been bid for the Alda insignia."

"Four hundred and five—ten—fifteen—"

As the figure drew closer to the half million, the bids slackened. Tall, grey-haired Sorenson from Dallas, Texas, was still bidding; so was tiny Hondoni from Tokyo, with his expansive smile and his shiny death's head face. The English bidders had dropped out—so had those from the Commonwealth. Gradually, Mannering began to realize that he *wanted* those jewels—wanted them to stay at 'home' or as near home as he could find. For a while he had been bidding almost against his will, driven by a com-

pulsion stemming from the vitality of the man by his side. Suddenly he realized that the insignia mattered.

"Five hundred and fifty thousand," echoed the auctioneer.

"Five seventy-five." That was Sorenson, deliberately laconic.

Mannering paused.

"Five hundred-eighty five." Hondoni's sounded rather like a tape-recorded voice.

"Ninety," said Sorenson.

"Six hundred," Mannering bid. He waited, very tense, as if he were bidding not for the Australian but for himself. There was a longer pause; he began to wonder, almost to hope, that the others had reached their limit. Hondoni whispered to a man next to him, then leaned back and closed his eyes. Mannering fought against a lump in his throat. Six hundred thousand pounds, a million sheep, a million acres. Pounds, sheep, acres, pounds, sheep, acres.

Sorenson said: "Six hundred and five."

Mannering felt as if someone had dealt him a severe blow on the head—but as the American spoke, as all eyes were turned towards him, Brutus gripped his hand, and said:

"Six-fifty."

"Are you sure?"

"Are you bidding, Mr. Mannering?"

"Yes, get on with it," Brutus muttered.

"Six hundred and ten," Mannering said.

Somewhere, someone let out a long, slow breath. After that there was a silence so acute that it seemed impossible to realize that so many people were in this room.

Brutus's fingers were like claws round Mannering's wrist. Mannering did not notice it, but he was gripping Lorna's

wrist as tightly. The hush over the room was like a physical thing.

"Twenty," Sorenson said laconically.

"Thirty," said Mannering very promptly. If he made Sorenson think that he was determined to get the prize at all costs, he might make him drop out.

Instead, Sorenson was back without the slightest pause.

"Forty."

"Fifty."

Brutus was muttering under his breath and Mannering tried to hear what he said, but could not quite catch the words. The Australian's blue eyes were fixed dynamically on Sorenson, his body as tense as a wire charged with electricity.

Very deliberately, Sorenson said:

"I bid six hundred and seventy five thousand pounds."

There was a gasp, as if every person present had taken a deep breath. Men who had been in this business all their lives, collectors who kept millions of pounds worth of precious things in their homes and galleries, others, who would not normally turn a hair or show any kind of excitement, turned their heads to look at Mannering, not at the man really responsible for this searing duel.

What was Brutus muttering?

Mannering felt a moment of anguish when he heard the "Six hundred and seventy-five" from the Texan. His mind seemed to be split into two, one part longing for the insignia, the other convinced that even if Brutus bought it, it would do him no good. These jewelled splendours belonged in some great museum or private home, where they could be loved — by some almost worshipped — not in a sheep station in the Australian outback.

"Going at six hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds,

for the first time," the auctioneer called. He looked at Mannering.

What was Brutus saying?

"For the second time,"

Brutus seemed to be hissing: "Seven, go to seven."

"For the third time." Now the hammer was raised and Sorenson was beginning to smile.

"Seven!" breathed Brutus.

Something held Mannering back. His compulsive desire for the insignia was almost overwhelming, but suddenly he realized that in the last few moments he had become obsessed by his own passion for beautiful jewels with a history. Was he, in fact, considering his client's real interest? The excitement had affected Brutus like a fever; he, too, had been temporarily carried away. His insistence on raising his figure was sheer folly, even six hundred thousand pounds, which he had quoted in cold blood, would have been crazy. Nevertheless, this was hardly Mannering's responsibility. Brutus had asked him to bid seven — so why was he hesitating?

In those few instants, as every face was turned towards him, Mannering's head was a whirling maelstrom of conflicting thoughts and emotions.

"For the fourth time," the auctioneer was saying, and the hammer struck its block, a tiny little sound which echoed once, very clearly, about the room. "Sold to Mr. David Sorenson," went on the auctioneer almost wearily, as if he also had suffered from the strain.

Now Sorenson couldn't stop smiling, in fact he was almost grinning, with delight.

Then in a loud, clear voice, Nathaniel Brutus said: "You bloody pommie, you've sold me out." As he spoke he stood up, and loomed over Mannering with both fists clenched; Mannering felt sure the man was going to strike him.

Again, there was a hush, and again everyone stared.

Then Brutus turned to Lorna.

"This basket sold me out. He'll sell you out. He'll sell anyone out. Get him off your back, lady."

He looked at Mannering with searing contempt, then turned and pushed his way through the bewildered crowd. As he did so he passed near Sorenson, and said clearly:

"Pay your cobber well, Yank. He really worked for you."

"How very unfortunate, Mannering."

"What a poor loser."

"Zis man, Mannering, 'ow well do you know him?"

"Bad show, John."

"John," drawled Sorenson, "is the fella mad?"

"Angry mad," Mannering said.

"He looked psychopathic mad to me."

"I hope you're wrong," Mannering said, but he was uneasy. With Lorna on his arm he moved towards the doors, and suddenly newspapermen besieged him, cameras clicked and flashed, more questions were flung at Mannering.

"Who is he, Mr. Mannering?"

"How long have you acted for him?"

"Are you a friend of Mr. Sorenson?"

"Who is he? . . . What's his name? . . . Where does he live? . . ."

In the street, it was beginning to rain for the first time for some weeks. The sky was overcast, umbrellas were mushrooming, tyres squeaking. Mannering and Lorna got into the first taxi which came along, and sank back in relief. Mannering said:

"Hart Row, please."

"Hart where?"

"Hart Row."

"It's only round the corner if you walk."

"But it will take ten minutes by taxi," Mannering said.

"Well, if that's what you want." The taxi driver shrugged, and moved slowly into a stream of traffic as Mannering turned to Lorna, smiling wryly. Lorna was flushed; it made her dark blue eyes spark as if with anger. She hadn't spoken a word since Brutus had stalked off, and she sat there silently.

"My sweet, it wasn't as bad as that," Mannering protested.

"John," she said, "*could* he be a psychopath?"

"Anyone could be."

"No. Don't make light of it."

Mannering said almost ruefully: "I know what you mean. Amazing what an effect Nathaniel Brutus can have on one, isn't it?"

"He believed you sold him out," said Lorna.

"I know he did."

Lorna went on, almost as if something was forcing her to speak.

"Did you?"

"Now, come!"

"John," Lorna said, "you were acting for him. You'd seen his credentials. You knew he could afford it. He kept on telling you to go up to seven hundred thousand pounds." She repeated this as if convincing herself. "Seven hundred-thousand pounds! You must have heard him, but you didn't take his instructions."

Mannering had drawn away from her.

"Did you?" she persisted.

He had to admit it. "No."

"Why not, John?"

Very slowly and deliberately, Mannering said: "Are you really implying that I deliberately let Sorenson in?"

After a pause, Lorna said in a helpless kind of voice: "That's exactly what you did. You must have heard Brutus, and you didn't take his instructions; so you did let Sorenson in. What on earth made you do it?" When Mannering didn't answer but sat staring at her as if at a stranger, she went on: "You know what Brutus will think, don't you? And others probably. They'll think you had an arrangement with Sorenson."

She sat and looked at Mannering, and he had no doubt of the truth. Lorna, his wife, was prepared to believe, perhaps did believe, that he had made an under-cover deal with the Texan.

Before he could speak, the taxi pulled up, and the cabby announced: "Hart Row."

CHAPTER FOUR

MISTRUST

LARRABY and two assistants were in the shop. There could be little doubt that Larraby sensed that all was not well, for he did not inquire how the auction had gone, but simply welcomed Lorna and ushered her along, unlocking the door of Mannering's office for her. She went straight in.

"I don't want to see anyone, Josh — particularly Brutus," Mannering said quietly.

"I'll make sure you're not disturbed," Larraby promised.

Mannering went in and closed the door. Lorna was standing in front of the desk, gazing up at a portrait she had painted of Mannering in the guise of a cavalier. It lacked the

touch of greatness which the other picture had, but was nevertheless very good. Mannering stood watching her. He had a strange impression; that she was here and yet not with him; she preferred to look at the man of the portrait rather than the man of flesh and blood.

"Lorna," Mannering said.

She continued to study the portrait.

"Lorna," Mannering repeated, taking her arm, "you couldn't be more wrong."

When she made no comment, one part of Mannering's mind was resentful, almost angry, that she could think like this, but the other part faced the unpalatable fact that she did. He sensed that if he lost his temper, or said the wrong thing, even if he defended his motives too much, he would make the situation worse. Her profile was quite beautiful, so familiar and so well loved. Why should she even suspect—

She turned towards him, and he saw her as he knew others often did — frowning, almost sombre; in days gone by, some people had even called her sullen. Her eyes lacked their usual lustre, as if something had drawn much of the vitality out of her. It wasn't a question of *why* did she suspect, rather how could he convince her that she was wrong?

Then he felt as if something exploded inside his head, setting every nerve tingling and ringing, lighting up everything in his mind, creating a vividness of understanding which he had not even suspected before.

She was right; he *had* let Brutus down.

She was right; it *did* look as if there could be only one possible reason — collusion with Sorenson.

She was right; Brutus *would* inevitably think he had been betrayed, and the trade might well have the same impression.

This was not all.

He could not satisfactorily answer the simple question,

Why had he not gone up to seven hundred thousand? At first he hadn't heard what Brutus was muttering, but he had understood well enough before the hammer had fallen. If he were challenged on motives, he could not explain because he did not know the explanation. There was a confusion of impressions in his mind. He wanted to tell Lorna what he was thinking, but there were two reasons why he did not. He couldn't be lucid with her when his own mind was confused; and resentment was building up again, resentment that she did not simply take him on trust.

She should, God knew, she should, as she had a hundred times in the past, over a hundred different issues, many of them grave. Why didn't she now?

He had to say something.

He said: "You couldn't be more wrong, but you feel quite sure you're right, don't you?"

"I don't know what I think," Lorna said. "You didn't —" she broke off.

"I didn't what?"

"You didn't see Brutus's face, did you?"

"I don't know quite what you mean."

"You didn't see his face while he waited for you to bid for him."

"I was trying to make up my mind. It seemed —" the very words sounded weak as he uttered them — "it seemed *wrong* for him to spend that money on the insignia."

"It was *his* money. If he was allowed a million pounds credit by the bank, he's sure to have even more. You can't have thought he couldn't afford it."

Mannering said heavily: "I suppose not."

"There can't be any argument about it," Lorna said sharply.

"I see."

"Obviously there can't."

Mannering felt as if something inside him had turned to ice.

"There isn't much point in discussing it, is there?" he said.

"I suppose not," said Lorna in turn, but she didn't look away. Warmth and light sprang into her eyes, and he knew that there was a change in her manner and her mood; the ice in his heart began to melt. She moved her hands forward and he took them lightly. "But we can't leave it like this, can we?"

"Can't we agree that I was muddle-headed?"

"But John," Lorna said, "you never are."

The ice came back. He let her hands fall, backed away, and gave a short, sharp laugh.

"No, I'm not, am I? So why was I this time? Or was I? Had I in fact a secret arrangement with Sorenson?"

Lorna said: "Don't be absurd, I know you hadn't." At least that was a concession. "But what I think you have —"

"Go on," Mannering said, flatly.

"Oh, it doesn't matter."

"As you said, we can't really leave it like this," Mannering reminded her. "We'd better talk it out. What do you think I have?"

Lorna hesitated, obviously formulating her sentence with great care.

"I think you are one of a privileged circle of collectors and galleries, and that you think Brutus is an outsider. So your subconscious reaction was to keep him out."

Mannering said blankly: "Oh."

"Isn't that true?" Lorna demanded.

"I don't think my mind is working well this morning," Mannering said. "I never was particularly strong on psychia-

tric and psychological analysis. I think they're too often complicated for the sake of complication — but you know I think that." He almost raised his voice to go on: "What on earth's got into you? This is nonsense," but he stopped himself. "If a man wants to buy, I don't want to stop him."

"But you did stop this man."

It was unanswerable, so he did not attempt to answer.

"John, *why* did you?" Lorna persisted.

"We really must ask a psychiatrist," Mannering said, offhandedly. "He might say that it was because I didn't think the jewels were worth the money to Brutus, and that he was paying through the nose for something which didn't mean a thing to him beyond the satisfaction of getting what he wanted. If he'd gone for something more reasonable —"

"Didn't *mean* anything to him!" interpolated Lorna.

"They couldn't have meant more than the satisfaction of having possession — or of making sure someone else didn't."

"Your friends, you mean," said Lorna, almost acidly. "If only you'd seen his face."

"I've seen all I want to of his face."

"I mean at that particular moment."

Mannering moved to his desk, sat down, and studied Lorna intently — more intently, perhaps, than he had done for a long time. She *was* older. Not old, in fact hardly middle-aged, but the years had left signs of their passing. She was beautiful as he had always known her to be, but — and this was an awful thought — it was almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. In a fantastic way it was like looking at the face of a stranger. Beyond all doubt there was something about her which he had never noticed before.

"And you did see what he looked like at that moment," Mannering said drily.

"Yes I did."

"What was it, precisely?"

"Something I've only seen once or twice in my life," Lorna answered. "I don't really know how to describe it. It was a quality I think I would give ten years of my life to put on canvas. Of course, I can't. I couldn't. I doubt if it could be done, but — how I would love to." She spoke in a low-pitched voice obviously groping for something which defied definition.

How bloody silly could he become?

"It's the thing I used to sense in you," Lorna continued. "I always tried to capture it, but never really succeeded. His very soul was in his face, in his eyes."

Mannering checked himself from echoing "Soul?" sarcastically.

"Do you know what I mean?" Lorna went on.

"I'm trying to understand."

"Do try, John. I don't believe it was simply that he wanted the jewels for the sake of possession. It was much more — he had seen something which gave a purpose, a meaning — oh, I know this sounds like clap-trap, I'm not really making sense, but — you know what a child's face looks like, sometimes, when it wants something desperately, a kind of yearning. A child wants with all the intensity it's capable of, withholding nothing. Brutus looked like that."

She stopped staring at Mannering; and she was still a stranger. His voice was flat and rather gruff when he spoke.

"He certainly made a great impression on you."

"Yes," Lorna admitted simply.

Mannering shrugged. "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't understand you."

"Aren't you saying you want me to find Brutus and try to heal his wounds?"

Lorna looked away quickly, and he knew at once that he

had said something wrong, had struck the false note he had been striving to avoid. He went on hastily:

"That wasn't meant sarcastically."

"Wasn't it?" Lorna asked.

Mannering said with sudden heat: "Lorna, what on earth are we doing? Quarrelling over this? Can't we get it out of our minds?" When she didn't answer, he went on almost bitterly: "But, of course, I didn't see him at the moment of disappointment."

"No," said Lorna. "I only wish you had." She moved again, much more briskly, towards the door. "It must be getting near one, and I've a luncheon date." She didn't say with whom she was going to lunch, but turned the handle. "You won't forget that we're seeing the Plenders for dinner tonight, will you?"

She went out, without closing the door, and for a few seconds he heard her footsteps muffled by the runners. Larraby murmured something to her, so did one of the assistants, then the shop door opened and closed. The silence which followed was something imposed, heavy, intolerable. Mannering stayed without moving for a long time. Larraby paused for an instant by the open door and Mannering was aware of him but did not speak or show any sign of attention. After a few minutes, the telephone bell on the Welsh dresser rang. Larraby answered so quickly that he must have been at his stool.

"This is Quinn's . . . I'm not sure, sir, will you please hold on." There was a pause, then a tap at the door, which opened wider. Larraby stood still.

"Well?"

"Mr. Sorenson would like a word with you, sir. He is catching a plane back to New York this evening."

"Oh," said Mannering. "Sorenson. Yes." He picked up

the receiver of the extension to the shop telephone. "Hallo, David? Nice of you to ring."

"Nice of me, nothing," Sorenson said. "John, I didn't want to go back without a word with you. I want you to know how sorry I am about the bother this morning. When that guy talked to you that way, I thought he'd gone crazy."

"I still think he might have," Mannering said.

"It wouldn't have been so bad if the newspapers hadn't got hold of it," Sorenson said.

"Newspapers?" echoed Mannering, startled.

"Why, sure. John, I want you to know that I didn't say a word out of place. I had three newspapermen follow me from the auction rooms, but I gave them all the conventional answers." There was a pause, before Sorenson went on with obvious embarrassment: "You know how these guys twist things, don't you? Why, they even put words in your mouth."

Mannering thought: What is he really saying? Aloud, he asked quite sharply: "What questions did they ask?"

"John, they were crazy men."

"What did they want to know?"

"Oh, heck, John, I just have to go. They asked if we had discussed the Alda jewels before and I told them yes, in passing, that you knew I was coming over to bid for them. They wanted to know if we ever did business together, and well, heck, I couldn't say we never had, could I? John, I'm sorry, but I've a lunch-time appointment, I just have to go. When will I see you again in New York or Dallas? Don't make it so long next time. Good-bye now."

Mannering said stonily: "Have a good flight."

Sorenson's telephone was down first. Mannering put his on the cradle very slowly and deliberately. Then he stood up, feeling almost dazed, as if these things were not really

happening to him. He opened the door, and saw Larraby at the dresser-desk.

"Josh, I want to know where Nathaniel Brutus is staying. Get everyone onto it." As he spoke, he realized that he should have known, should have asked Brutus last night: he had never taken the Australian seriously, and that was a mistake he was already regretting very much indeed.

CHAPTER FIVE

FLIGHT 701

Larraby went out to start the inquiries, and Mannering sorted through a pile of books and magazines on a shelf behind him. He selected three glossy magazines. *Apollo*, *The Antiquarian* and *The Fine Arts World*. All were very heavy, all were full of advertisements of antiques, *objets d'art* and paintings, each had a few articles about collectors' items and forthcoming auctions. He thumbed through *The Fine Arts World* first, almost sure he would find what he wanted there, for it carried world-wide news of auctions and sale-rooms. Towards the back was a section marked 'Australia'. He pressed the magazine open, and glanced at several advertisements of pieces offered for sale. Then he turned a leaf and came upon a double page spread. One side read:

MELBURY HOUSE

GREAT SALE

of antiques, jewellery, paintings

known to be the

FINEST PRIVATE COLLECTION

in the

Southern Hemisphere

on the other page were details of the sale itself:

> The Sale will be held at Melbury House, in New South Wales, equidistant from Sydney (NSW) and Melbourne (VIC) and close to
>
> CANBERRA
>
> AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY
>
> The goods offered will be on display at Melbury House for the week
>
> OCTOBER 5 — OCTOBER 12
>
> The Sale itself will begin on
>
> OCTOBER 14
>
> and will continue for as long a period as necessary.
>
> Catalogues and other details will be sent airmail to any part of the world.

It was now the twentieth of September.

As Mannering finished reading the announcement, there was a tap, and Larraby came in. Mannering looked up, surprised by his own eagerness.

"Traced him?"

"In a way, sir."

"What does that mean?"

"He has been staying at the Park Lane Hilton, but he paid his bill half-an-hour ago and left by taxi for London Airport," Larraby reported.

"Oh," said Mannering. "So he's going home."

"His passage was booked by telephone at about half-past eleven, sir, yes. To Sydney."

"What flight?" demanded Mannering, and then realized that it was absurd to expect Larraby to know.

"There is a Qantas flight at two-thirty, sir — late because of a postponement. It is the only direct flight today."

"Thanks," said Mannering. "All right, Josh." He leaned back in his chair. "Have you heard of my heinous crime?"

"I understand there was a little misunderstanding," Larraby replied. "I'm very sorry about it, Mr. Mannering."

"Yes." Mannering pursed his lips, and said quickly: "Send someone out for a sandwich and some coffee for me, and have my car brought round at one-thirty sharp. And send in any mail for me to sign before I leave, in case I'm delayed."

"Very good," said Larraby.

After the manager had gone, Mannering stood up rather self-consciously, and stepped round the desk to contemplate the portrait. He could remember how happy Lorna had been while she had been painting it; happy and carefree. In those days they had been carefree much of the time, light-hearted, gay, and always content with each other. Not long ago there had been a period when they had seemed to be drifting apart, but that had soon passed, and for a while they had been back to their old enjoyment of being together. In the past two or three months Mannering had been preoccupied with some big deals and Lorna had been furiously busy in her studio above their Chelsea apartment; it was easy to realize, now, that they had seen very little of each other. Certainly something had gone adrift; this morning's situation would never have developed had everything been normal between them.

Without any conscious process of reasoning, Mannering came to a simple conclusion; *he* had to put things right. It would be useless to sink into a mood of exasperation, or to start persuading himself that this was Lorna's fault. He was

quite sure of one fact: she would be as anxious as he to get back to an even keel.

There was one obvious thing to do.

At twenty-five past one, his car was outside the shop, a black Allard with a turn of speed and a rakish appearance which he never failed to relish. He slid behind the wheel, watched by several passers-by and by the assistants in the shop, and started off. With luck he would reach London Airport in thirty-five minutes. He turned into Bond Street, then cut through towards Piccadilly, passed Hyde Park Corner, and settled down to a straight run. Traffic was light, as it often was at lunch-time, and he had no problems until he was past the Chiswick Fly Over, and on the Great West Road. Suddenly, he was behind a whole stream of crawling traffic. Five minutes later he began to wonder if he would reach the airport in time. Ten minutes later still, the traffic began to move past a broken-down petrol tanker, and he became hopeful again.

What on earth was the matter with him?

He should have allowed another half-hour. If he had *really* wanted to see Brutus, he would have left much earlier. As he sped along the Bath Road he found himself asking:

"Do I really want to see him?"

After a pause, he asked again:

"Or do I simply want Lorna to think I did?"

He swung into the airfield, went under the tunnel, and pulled up outside the main approach to customs. A porter came up.

"Which flight, sir?"

"Qantas, to Sydney."

"Bit tight for that," the man remarked. "It's due off in

ten minutes, the passengers are embarking now. Where's your baggage, sir?"

Mannering thrust a pound-note in his hand.

"I'll be back in ten minutes," he said.

He went racing up the stairs, no longer in any doubt that he wanted to see Brutus, positively fearful that he wouldn't. He needed the luck to run across a customs man or an airport police officer whom he knew. Almost at once he saw the Chief Inspector whom he had known for years.

"Hallo, Mr. Mannering. What's your hurry today?"

"I'd like a word with a passenger on the Qantas Flight," Mannering said breathlessly.

"Not much time," said the Chief Inspector. "They're walking across. Let's see what we can do." He took Mannering's arm and they half ran past Customs and the Immigration Officers to the cordoned off space where the passengers were filing through onto the airfield. Mannering did not see Brutus. An announcer called:

"Flight 701. Qantas Airways, calling at Rome, Beirut, Delhi, and Sydney, will leave from Bay Twelve, at fourteen-thirty. This is the last call."

"Any luck?" the Inspector asked.

"It looks as if he's gone ahead."

"I don't know that I can help you any more," the man said regretfully.

"No," said Mannering. Suddenly it became glaringly obvious that to snatch a word with Brutus would be sheer folly; he needed twenty minutes' discussion at least. So he made himself speak lightly. "Very many thanks for trying. I left it too late."

From just behind him, Brutus said searingly:

"You leave everything too late."

Mannering spun round. Brutus was dressed exactly as he

had been that morning, and was carrying a valise which had seen much better days. Under his arm was a newspaper. He stood absolutely unmoving, staring at Mannering. Mannering was aware of every feature, chiselled as if from coloured marble, and he could almost feel the other's penetrating gaze.

"I've time to say this," Mannering said. "I'm sorry I let you down."

"Try telling someone else that," Brutus retorted. "You're a snake." He snatched the newspaper from under his arm and thrust it at Mannering, who took it mechanically; then he pushed past, and disappeared. No one else was near, only the Inspector had witnessed the brief encounter.

"Well, what about that?" he said.

Mannering didn't speak, and the Inspector gave a strained little laugh.

"You, a snake!"

Mannering drew a deep breath.

"That's what he thinks."

"He made that obvious," said the Inspector ruefully. "Well, you caught up with him."

Mannering said, "I certainly did." He unfolded *The Evening Globe*, feeling quite sure that Brutus had thrust it into his hands for a purpose. There was nothing on the front page, but on the inside page opposite the leader were a headline and a photograph.

The photograph was of himself.

The headline read:

FRACAS AT CATESBY'S

FAMOUS DEALER ACCUSED

He skimmed through the story, at first hardly taking it

in, but as he began to read it a second time, the ugly truth dawned on him; this was almost damning.

Two men wanted the Alda insignia — a man from Texas and a man from Australia. The Texan got what he wanted. The Australian got what he believes was a raw deal. He had arranged for a dealer of world wide repute to bid higher for him, and the dealer — famous John Mannering, owner of Quinn's — didn't speak, nod, blink, or cross his legs, any of which actions would have constituted a bid in the sacrosanct atmosphere of Catesby's.

It wasn't particularly sacrosanct this morning. In fact the indignant digger nearly dotted the offending pommie on the nose.

John Mannering (see picture) is an old friend of Texan multi-millionaire, David Sorenson. Mr. Sorenson says they have done a lot of business together. Mr. Mannering was not available for questioning. Perhaps he doesn't want us to know the answers.

P.S. The insignia went for six hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds. The bid not made might have been for a lot more. But for one person being tongue-tied, the Alda Estate might be considerably better off. So would the Exchequer. So would our export drive.

Mannering was aware of the Inspector looking at him intently, but he could hardly make himself speak. He moistened his lips, folded the paper, then suddenly thrust it into the other's hand.

"Read what a snake I am," he said. "I'm really grateful to you."

He turned and hurried off. He did not speak to the porter who stood faithfully by his car, but gave him another pound note, took the wheel, and drove off. The porter stared

at him dazedly. The engine roared, and a little car coming into the service road swerved sharply out of the way.

"Damned fool," Mannering muttered. "Get a hold on yourself."

It wasn't easy, but he slowed down, and made himself think deliberately. Undoubtedly that was a vicious write-up, almost as if someone wanted to stick a knife in his back, but even if the facts — *facts*, remember — were related in a different way and without the vitriolic pen, the same impression would emerge, that he had betrayed much more than the Australian — he had betrayed a client's trust. And trust in his particular business was as vital as the air he breathed.

By far the worst feature of the article was the implication that by his failure he had lost the Estate a large sum of money.

And he *had*. Had he done what Brutus had told him, the Estate would have benefited by at least another twenty-five thousand pounds. No one could blame the beneficiaries for censuring him, for accusing him. It did not matter which way he looked at the situation, it seemed to get worse.

Had Lorna foreseen these consequences?

In any case, why hadn't he?

If it came to that, why hadn't he made that bid?

The truth, Mannering realized, was that he would never know the answer. There must have been a deep psychological reason. It was no use sneering at psychology or at Lorna about that. But if he himself didn't know, how could he explain it to others? How could he make denials which did not sound empty and hollow?

He turned left, away from London, and was soon on the open road. He let the engine full out. Five minutes of high speed did him good. Hardly thinking, he turned off the

main highway, and soon found himself near the river. He pulled off the road and sat at the wheel, smoking, one moment thinking, the next trying not to think; he simply didn't know how to cope.

A car passed from behind, with a girl at the wheel; an open sports car and a bare-headed girl. She slowed down, and glanced over her shoulder. He continued to stare after her. She drove on, but pulled off the road a few hundred yards further along.

Suddenly, Mannering found himself longing for company.

CHAPTER SIX

RIVERSIDE

The girl was sitting at the wheel of the car, a red M.G., facing the river where it was divided into two channels by an island crowded with beech and birch saplings, thickets of bramble and masses of ferns. All of these were beginning to turn colour in autumn's slow advance. The river flowed, smooth as molten glass, carrying small branches, twigs, ice-cream papers and a beer-can, to gather against a jutting bank and create a miniature cascade.

It was very warm.

Mannering pulled his car alongside the M.G., and looked down at the driver. She smiled up at him. She was in the early thirties, he imagined, quietly but expensively dressed in a blue linen suit. Her eyes were grey, clear, heavily touched with pale eyeshade. She had an attractiveness which few women possessed, and carried the serenity of one absolutely sure of herself.

"Hallo," she said.

"Hallo."

"Did I stop for you or did you follow me?"

Mannering smiled. "Both, I hope."

Her smile widened. She wasn't beautiful in the true sense, but flaunted its sophisticated equivalent. On one side of her mouth just below the corner — he couldn't be sure whether imposed by art or nature — was a small beauty spot.

"I'll go along with both," she conceded. "Why did you follow me?"

"Why does a man follow an attractive woman?"

"My, my," she said. "A big bad wolf."

Mannering laughed, but the laugh concealed a sudden, almost startled thought. "Wolf." That was exactly how he was behaving — like a wolf. What on earth was happening to him? He was still looking down into the woman's face, liking the way her lips curved.

"Aren't you used to big bad wolves?" he asked.

"Not in Allards."

"What do they usually drive?"

"Jaguars."

"That's an interesting social phenomenon," Mannering said. "The manufacturers ought to know about it." As he spoke a droning sound drew closer and louder, and he glanced up. A huge aircraft was circling and climbing, the jet-streams from the four engines still thick and dark. For the first time since setting eyes on the woman he thought of Nathaniel Brutus. This wasn't the Qantas aircraft, which would be a hundred miles away by now, but he gave that little thought. Not until this moment had he realized how heavily the shadow had lain upon him, nor how completely it had cleared in the past few minutes.

There was a quizzical expression in the woman's eyes.

"Conscience?" she asked.

"What on earth for?"

"You looked up at the aircraft as if you were saying goodbye to someone near and dear, whom you'd forgotten for a while."

"Did I?"

"Wife, perhaps?"

"In fact, a he."

She persisted, half-serious, half-amused. "Son?"

He thought: I haven't a son. Is that what's wrong with Lorna and me? No son, no daughter? He wondered with a sudden flash of intuition whether this was the cause of Lorna's restlessness. The fact that she was always involved with exhibitions, painting, sitters; even when she had a little time to herself, she would arrange to have someone in to dinner, or to go out. "Don't forget we're dining with the Plenders." It was a kind of refrain. "We're going here, we're going there." "I'm doing this, I have to do that."

Now he was blaming Lorna, which was nonsense. He, too, was always working.

Working.

There was no need for it. Money was no longer an incentive, and hadn't been for some time. Success, then? But they were at the top of their respective callings. Lorna could easily have three commissions for each one she accepted. He —

His supremacy in his field, which demanded absolute integrity, was being questioned. Who the hell had written that piece? Was it out of spite, or sheer envy? Or could it have been justified, at least by appearances?

The woman in the M.G. broke through the medley of his thoughts. He had looked away from her towards the island, now he looked back at her.

"You're not very gallant," she said.

"I'm not?" He was wool-gathering.

"You had to be reminded that I was here."

"Yes," he said. "Yes." To say he was sorry would be naive, it wasn't the right thing here and now; he had to make a comment which would intrigue her. She crinkled up her eyes at the corners and looked a little older because of it. Older? More mature. "I'd forgotten you. I would much rather have forgotten the man up there."

"I think I could help you to forget him," she said.

Mannering smiled. "I have an idea you could, too."

"Do you want to forget?"

His thoughts were distracted by a mental image of Nathaniel Brutus's blazing eyes, and the way the Australian had behaved at the airport. He did want to forget both the man and everything that had followed since his first meeting with him.

"Yes," he said.

The woman's eyes were triumphant.

"For five minutes, an hour, a day, or a night?"

Mannering did not know why, but suddenly he was wary. He studied her more closely, and tried to concentrate. It was lack of concentration that had landed him in this situation.

"What difference does it make?"

"Five minutes, and the car would do. An hour, and we ought to find a secluded nook. For a night —" She broke off.

He had no doubt at all that she was laughing at him—as Brutus had laughed—putting on a very good act; she might or might not mean all she was implying, but apparently she had good reason for wanting to make him believe she did. What reason could she have? Who was she? Was it co-

incidence that she had passed him? From those questions it was a short step to wondering whether she had followed him from the airport, and once the suspicion was in his mind it became almost a certainty. Should he challenge her? Or should he play along for a while, and see how far she would go? Although the doubts were so clear in his mind, he enjoyed looking at her, enjoyed her feminine provocation.

"And where would you suggest for a night?" he asked.

"Must I think of everything?"

"I thought you might have a little nest nearby."

"I haven't," she said. "Isn't that a pity?" She slid slowly backwards in her seat, and opened the jacket of the suit. She had a fine bosom, and wanted him to know this. It was true that a high neckline could be more alluring than a deep plunge. She rested her hand on the back of her seat in such a way that she had to look at him sideways, and there was a seductive hint of languor in her manner.

"You must get tired of hearing it," she said, "but you're a remarkably handsome man."

"And you are a most intriguing woman."

"Why don't you come down and sit with me?"

"My legs are too long."

She shifted her position slightly, and sat up. Mannering opened his door and got out of the car, so that as she came from hers, their bodies touched. She meant them to touch; and with a shock of realization he knew that it was what he wanted. She turned her face upwards towards him, invitingly. With half of his mind he thought: She's a Delilah. She followed me. And with the other half of his mind he thought: She's lovely, she's desirable. With a twinge of conscience he thought of Lorna—not Lorna at her best but staring at him censoriously, suspiciously.

His car door was open, and so was that of the M.G., making a kind of trap or compartment, so that the woman and he were forced to stand close together. She held her head back; and for a moment he glimpsed a long, slender white throat. Then he lowered his head and brushed her cheek with his lips, sliding his arm round her. He could feel the pressure of her demanding body.

"You're very beautiful," he whispered.

"You're *very* handsome."

"What newspaper do you represent?" he asked in the same whispering voice, so that at first it must have sounded like another endearment, another stage in this strange seduction. He knew that at first she did not understand, but suddenly her body stiffened.

Slowly, she said: "How did you know?"

"I don't believe you're what you're pretending to be."

"A whore?"

"You used the word," said Mannering. "Which newspaper?"

"The *Talebearer*," she answered. That was a kind of *Private Eye* which had won big sales and popularity because of its debunking of idols and its glorification of sex.

"Were you at Catesby's today?"

"Wouldn't you have recognized me?"

"I wasn't myself at Catesby's," Mannering said. "When did you begin to follow me?"

"When you left Quinn's."

"Your Editor was quick off the mark."

"The man who wrote that piece about you in the *Globe* telephoned him."

"And the Editor was sure you could write one even more malicious."

"Better," she said. "Much better. I had a special reason."

"May I know what it is?"

"I'm Australian," she said. "And I'm in London on a visit. Anything that happens to an Australian is big news down under."

"So I'm told," Mannering said. "Is there an Australian edition of the *Talebearer*?"

"I freelance," she told him.

He was still holding her. He didn't let her go because he thought that if he stayed as he was she might talk more freely. There was a kind of intimacy, and now her body had relaxed again, soft yet firm. He moved his head so that he could look into her eyes.

"And you were prepared to face the fate worse than death to get your story."

"John," she said, "even you can't be as old-fashioned as that."

"Old-fashioned!"

"You can't believe that I would believe anything we did together was worse than death."

Slowly he answered: "I suppose not."

"In fact," she said, "I think it would be wonderful."

"Yes," Mannering agreed. "I'm sure it would be. What did the *Talebearer* Editor tell you to do?"

"To dig and dig and dig."

"So as to find the real dirt?"

"The real truth," she corrected.

"What did he expect you to find?"

She gave a little laugh.

"A man of unusual honour. In fact—" she moved to free herself and Mannering did not stop her "—he wagered me two to one that I couldn't make you compromise yourself with me."

"So," said Mannering.

"You sound almost disappointed."

"I didn't expect the Editor of the *Talebearer* to be a man of such discernment."

She laughed and got back into the M.G.

"John."

"Yes?"

"Why did you betray my little fellow-countryman? To cut him down to size?"

In a way that was what Lorna had said, and Mannering didn't answer.

"Or are you really in Sorenson's pocket?" this woman asked.

"What does your Editor think?"

"He thinks you had some high-sounding motive, but he couldn't imagine what it would be."

Mannering laughed again. "No motive," he declared.

"You don't really expect me to believe that."

"Believed or not, it's true."

She began to frown. "*Can* it be?"

"The explanation is very simple," Mannering said.

"It will have to be convincing."

"I didn't hear him," said Mannering. He did not relish lying, but with a newspaper such as the *Talebearer* he felt he had no possible alternative. "He had given me a limit of six hundred thousand. He kept muttering something, but a man near me was shuffling, and my right ear isn't too good. When it was too late, I realized he was saying I could go up to seven hundred thousand." Mannering leaned back against the door of the Allard, and gave a smile which was part-rueful, part-amused. He could tell from the woman's expression that she was already half-convinced.

"You really *mean* that?"

"I mean it."

"Good God!"

"Will your Editor believe it?"

"He'll laugh his head off," she said. "And I will have to buy him the best dinner in London."

"One of these days I'll buy you a better one," Mannering promised, smiling with genuine amusement at her almost comical expression. It was a minute or two before she recovered; even then it wasn't a full recovery.

"Do you know who wrote that article in the *Globe*?" Mannering asked.

"No."

Mannering was not sure that he believed her, but he let it pass.

"Do you know why it was so vindictive?"

"I don't think it was vindictive at all," she said. "It was just a piece of smart journalism, a semi-smear story that will hit most of the gossip columns. The reporter had an anti-establishment mind, if you want to look at it that way. The Man Brutus was a story in himself, everyone was interested in him, but he wouldn't say a word, so he hardly got a mention. You were the next choice. It might have happened to anyone, except that--" she paused.

"Don't spare my feelings," Mannering said.

"Except that you didn't make the bid," she went on. "You've convinced me and you may convince anyone you talk to about it, but no one would believe it if they read it in cold print. You're stuck with the *Globe*'s version." She sat up straight, then switched on the engine. Above its beat, she finished: "I rather wish you weren't."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"STUCK WITH IT"

"LEGALLY, of course, you can't do much without taking a big risk," said Toby Plender. He was a man with a Punch-like chin and the most Machiavellian mind in the legal profession. He and Mannering had been close friends for over thirty years. "The innuendo that you had an ulterior motive for not bidding may be there, but *proving* it's there will be very difficult. You will get an apology, of course, but if you sue and the paper defends—as it certainly would—you'll have grave difficulty, unless —"

Lorna and Alice Plender, who had been talking about Jean Patou's visit to London, stopped immediately. Mannering was acutely aware of Lorna's expression, and the lack of animation in her eyes as she drew her brows together.

"—unless you can persuade this Australian to say that he didn't authorize you to go to seven hundred thousand."

"Of course," said Plender's wife, "it's criminal."

"What do you mean?" asked Lorna sharply.

Alice Plender's face dropped, and Mannering and Plender chuckled.

"I didn't mean *John* had been criminal, I meant that it's criminal that anyone can spend that kind of money on a few trinkets. Do you know—" her voice rose almost to a squeak —"that's nearly three-quarters of a million pounds."

"Trinkets," echoed Mannering. "*That's* a mixture of sacrilege and heresy."

"No jewels could possibly be worth it."

"Some collections would fetch a lot more," said Mannering. "So that's the only way, Toby."

"Yes."

"It's impossible," Lorna said. "John can't ask Brutus to *deny* that he authorized a bid up to seven hundred thousand pounds."

"In any case he's a long way away," Plender put in quickly. "Once you have an apology it will die down, John. Unless —" again he left a sentence hanging in the air.

"Unless what?" demanded Lorna.

"Forget it," said Plender.

"Toby, don't you try to be evasive, too."

There was a sudden tensing in the atmosphere. For the first time the Plenders appeared to sense that all was not well between the Mannerings—which was as rare as it was remarkable. Toby hesitated, then laughed, and said:

"What have you been keeping back, John?" Before there was any opportunity to answer, Plender went on: "I was going to say that there is a possibility that the Alda Estate might think they have a case against you for restricting the bidding. I don't know what such a case would look like in court."

Mannering didn't answer.

Lorna said: "If only you'd made that bid!"

"Yes," Mannering said wryly. "If only."

"Why didn't you?" asked Toby.

"That's the question we can't really answer," Lorna said.

"Lorna," said Mannering.

She was in the bedroom, slipping out of her dress. She had a fine, near-statuesque figure, and for the evening had worn a support bra, not a fully-formed one. She was sideways to

him, and reflected in a long mirror, her body was quite beautiful.

He hadn't said: "Lorna," in that way for a long, long time.

"Yes?" her voice was flat.

"What's really got into you?"

"You know very well."

"I don't know."

"Don't try to make more of it than there is."

"Surely there's plenty," Mannering said.

"That's what I mean." Lorna stretched out for her nightdress, slid the bra off, then pulled the nightdress over her head. She had done this a thousand times, and as often as not he would slip across and put his arms round her. Now, he simply stood on his side of the room, jacket off, collar and tie undone.

"Lorna," he tried again, "there must be something else."

"There isn't."

"I tell you—"

She turned to face him.

"There's no point in talking, John. We aren't getting anywhere."

"There's a lot of point in trying to. What has made you feel like this?"

After a long pause, she said: "You don't really believe that you shocked me this morning, do you?"

"I know I upset you, but—"

"No," said Lorna sharply. "It was much more than upset. You shocked me. I thought there were some things as—as natural to you as breathing, some standards which were inviolable. In the old days, even in the days when you were the Baron, when you would open a safe and steal a man's fortune, you had these standards."

"Lorna," Mannering said, "I sometimes stole a man's jewels, but never a pound from a man who needed it. You know that."

"That's what I've just said. There were inviolable standards."

"I haven't done Brutus an iota of harm."

"That's what's wrong," Lorna said. "That's what I can't understand. You honestly don't think you have. If you'd seen his face —"

"Oh, nonsense!"

Very slowly, Lorna turned round, pulled an angora wool wrap round her shoulders, and picked up a pot of cold cream.

"You really believe it is nonsense," she said. "You don't begin to accept the possibility that you destroyed something in Nathaniel Brutus."

"No, I don't," admitted Mannering. "It doesn't make any sense to me. What on earth could I have destroyed?"

"His faith in you for one thing."

"Darling, I really don't know what's got into you," Mannering said. "How could he—"

"You won't even listen!" Lorna cried, and when Mannering stood very still, silenced and dismayed by the obvious depth of her feeling, she went on: "He trusted you. He wanted those jewels, and didn't know what to do at Catesby's, he knew he would be like a fish out of water. You set him the nearly impossible task of bringing you that credit by half-past ten; you didn't really expect him to have the money or to get it in the time, did you? But he met all your conditions, he trusted a man whom he hardly knew, who must have seemed absolutely trustworthy, and—he was badly let down."

Mannering didn't speak.

"A bloody pommie let him down," Lorna said carefully. "That's what he'll say, that's how he'll look at it. You are supposed to represent everything that's best in British life, and —"

"Lorna —" interrupted Mannering. "Darling. You're building this up too high. You hardly knew the man. If he were to hear you talking like this he'd wonder what it was all about."

"Would he?" she asked. "Do you really think that?"

"I'm sure it's true."

"If you really believe it's true, then there's something different in you," Lorna said. "A change I don't much like."

What was she saying? What was she trying to do?

When they were in bed, Mannering thought of the way they had behaved only that morning. He tried to think back, to see whether he could recall any new attitude, any change in *her*, before today. Once again he came up against the inescapable fact that since they had returned from Hong Kong, nearly a year before, each had become more and more involved in his or her own work? Why? Had they deliberately shut out some aspect in their lives which they did not want to acknowledge. He remembered that in Hong Kong, and on the way back to England, they had been as ecstatically in love as ever in their lives, a rebirth of passion caused by the fact that each had come very near death.

Now—

He had changed? Nonsense! *She* had changed.

Or *they* had.

It was a period when they had no living-in maid at their Chelsea flat, and in such a circumstance Mannering usually got up first, brought in the morning tea, the newspapers, and the post. They would sit and glance at letters and head-

lines, and chat. Mannering woke a little after half-past seven, and glanced across—to an empty bed. He lay still for a few minutes, the near-quarrel of the previous night flooding his mind. Then Lorna looked in at the door.

"Hallo," she said. "Like some tea in bed?"

"It sounds wonderful."

"I'll bring it in five minutes." She went off, and he wondered whether her mood had changed since last night; he had only caught a glimpse of her face, and thought she looked tired. He heard her bustling about, heard the click of the newspapers being taken out of the letter-box. When she came in, he could see that she was pale and her eyes were red-rimmed and glassy. She sat on the side of the bed, and handed him several letters from the tray. Business post usually went to the shop, but friends round the world were liable to write to him at Chelsea.

There were two notes from dealers telling him they would soon be in London. He opened a third letter which had a London postmark, and read:

Dear Sir,

We have been requested by our clients, the Executors of the late Duke of Alda, to ask you to undertake to make good the difference between the sum obtained at today's auction at Catesby's and the amount of seven hundred thousand pounds, which figure we understand you were authorized to bid for Catalogue Item No. 27 at the auction.

Yours very truly,
Kempen, Howe, Kempen and Clarke

As signature, there was an almost illegible squiggle.

When Mannering looked up, he saw Lorna staring at him. Without a word, he handed the letter to her. He saw the way her brows knitted together, and was almost afraid of what

she would say. There was anger in her eyes when she finished reading.

"Do you know the executors?"

"I know one—a young man named Linn. I met him once when I was asked to display the insignia."

"Who asked you to display it?"

Mannering hesitated.

"Don't say you can't remember!"

"No," Mannering said. "I remember it very well. There was some talk at Catesby's about a display of the jewels and other effects, and I asked them whether they would like to use Quinn's window. It's the kind of thing that's happened before." He laughed on a curiously restrained note. "I'm doing very well on this affair, aren't I?"

"Who are the other executors?"

"A firm of solicitors—Kempen, Howe, Kempen and Clarke."

"It must be a try-on."

"I suppose so," said Mannering. "Toby mentioned this as a possibility, and he wouldn't have done so if he hadn't been worried about it. And if I say 'no deal'—"

"If!" interrupted Lorna. "Of course you'll say no deal! It's one thing to fail Brutus, quite another to submit to *this* kind of threat."

Mannering began to feel better.

"If I say 'No deal', which of course I will, they may try issuing a writ, or even some form of publicity." He gave the odd, restrained laugh again. "I'm prepared to believe anything will happen as a result of this."

"What will you do?"

"Send it over to Toby, and let him deal with it. There can't be any urgency," Mannering went on. "At least the law grinds slowly." He picked up a newspaper. "I wonder

what's in here," he said, opening it as Lorna unfolded another.

He found what he feared he would find on Page 3: a headline in *Mayfair's* column:

£25,000—GOING, GOING, GONE

There were squabbles among the millionaires at Catesby's yesterday when the *Duke of Alda's* Estate was divided amongst the world connoisseurs of fine art. Anger and recrimination came when (we are told) there was some misunderstanding between Australian sheep millionaire, *Nathaniel Brutus*, and that expert on jewels, *John Mannering* of *Quinn's*. Apparently, Mr. Mannering offered only £650,000 for the ducal insignia, although authorized by Mr. Brutus to bid up to £700,000—£25,000 more than the highest offer.

What's in a mere £25,000? I posed this question to Mr. Arnold Linn, one of the late Duke of Alda's executors. From his answer it would not surprise me if the loss of this sum to the Estate proved the cause of a great deal of litigation.

Mannering put the paper down, as Lorna said in a strangled voice:

"Who told them Brutus offered £700,000?"

"He told most of the people at Catesby's himself," Mannering remarked gloomily. "We didn't have to wait long for the publicity, did we?"

"But it's ludicrous!" Lorna cried. "Sorenson paid £675,000, so there's a gap of only £25,000. And if you'd gone to £680,000 Sorenson might have stopped. There might possibly be a case for £5,000, but this—" she broke off, more angrily than ever. "What are you going to do?"

Mannering hesitated, continuing almost casually:

"Get away from it all."

"But you've got to fight them, you can't run away!"

"Not even the new me?" asked Mannering, and immedi-

ately regretted saying it, for it made Lorna wince. "Sorry, sweet. I didn't say run away, I said get away."

"But where to?"

"Australia," Mannering answered, stretching forward and picking up the copy of *The Fine Arts World*. He opened it to the announcement of the sale and handed it to her.

"If Brutus has suddenly developed an interest in fine art, he might be at Melbury. If he isn't, I could look him up while I'm there." He saw a light glow in Lorna's eyes as he went on: "I'd like to see him and find out whether this went as deep with him as you think it did." He paused, and then added: "Will you come?"

"Yes," said Lorna, without hesitating. "I'd like to."

The truth, thought Mannering, was that Lorna wanted to see Nathaniel Brutus again. He did not try to understand why, simply accepted this as a fact.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FLIGHT

The first telephone call from a newspaper came at twenty to nine, while they were having breakfast.

The second, third and fourth came within the next ten minutes.

Mannering was about to leave for Quinn's when there was a ring at the front door bell. As he opened the door a light flashed and a photographer drew back as if afraid he might be risking reprisals. A lean man whom Mannering knew slightly said cheerfully.

"Mr. Mannering, I'm Bond, of the *World*—May I—"

"You may," Mannering said lightly. "I'm going to find out from my lawyer whether your piece this morning is actionable. I'm sure you wouldn't like to make me late for such a pleasure." He pushed past and closed the door behind him. The small lift was open, and he stepped in and pressed the button. Five floors below, two more newspapermen approached from the main entrance.

"Excuse me, sir, I'm from the *Globe*."

"Mr. Mannering, can you tell we whether you've heard from the Duchy of Alda's solicitors?"

"The question should be whether they'll hear from mine," Mannering said.

Two more newspapermen and a photographer were getting out of a car as he strode towards King's Road. Above all things he wanted a taxi, but instead of this a private car pulled up in front of him, and a man called:

"Mr. Mannering!"

"Oh, get to hell out of it!" growled Mannering, and strode past—then stopped abruptly, for the voice was that of young Tenby, one of the assistants at Quinn's. The young man was startled, and Mannering forced a smile as he turned back. "Didn't recognize you," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Larraby thought you might find a car useful, sir. I'll be glad to do anything I can. He tried to telephone you but your line was engaged at the time. There are several newspaper people at Quinn's, too."

"Several?" Mannering asked, sharply.

"Well—seven or eight, in point of fact. Mr. Larraby thought you might prefer not to come in until he's got rid of them."

"They're really going to town, aren't they?"

"The penalty of fame, sir!"

"We'll soon see how brittle fame is," said Mannering drily. "I'll go to Mr. Plender's office in the Barbican—ask Josh to telephone me there, will you?"

"Yes, sir. *Is* there anything I can do?" Tenby, twenty-three, nice-looking, bright-eyed, obviously hoped very much that there was.

"Yes," said Mannering. "Go to the B.O.A.C. or the Qantas offices, and get two return tickets to Sydney, New South Wales, by the first available flight after tonight—for me and for Mrs. Mannering. And keep it under your hat."

"You can be sure I will, sir!" Tenby's eyes became even brighter.

Toby Plender's office was in one of the new Barbican buildings, ferro-concrete and with countless windows, like blank oblong eyes. It had a clear view of the newly cleaned St. Paul's.

"Not a bad idea," Plender said. "I can keep 'em busy for a few weeks. I shouldn't think they could get a writ, and even if they did I think the judge would throw it out—he almost certainly would for anything over £5,000 at this stage. Now if the Duchy could persuade Sorenson to say he would have gone beyond seven hundred thousand, they might have a case, but they'd need an affidavit from him, and I can't imagine Sorenson would want to put you in an awkward position—can you?"

"I don't know why he should."

"In any case I could get in touch with you in Australia," said Plender. In the following pause, his telephone bell rang. He picked it up, listened for a moment, then handed the receiver to Mannering.

"Larraby, for you," he said.

"There is no particular business demanding your attention," Larraby told Mannering, a moment later. "The next major sale is at Aldenbury Hall, in November. The—ah—crowd outside hasn't grown any smaller and I think some sightseers have joined the photographers. If I were you I wouldn't come in. I can send Tenby round with any papers you may require."

"I'll take your advice, Josh," Mannering said.

"There's just one thing, sir. What shall I *tell* the newspapermen?"

Plender, who was listening on an extension on the other side of his desk, broke in quickly.

"I'll answer that one, John . . . Josh, Mr. Mannering is too scrupulous by far. Tell them that there was some misunderstanding about his instructions to bid over six hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and remind them that Mr. Brutus is not familiar with the proceedings at such auctions. Say that Mr. Mannering is going to Australia to attend an important sale, and will no doubt see Mr. Brutus and straighten this matter out . . . Yes . . . Yes, that's right. If any of the newspaper people want more, refer them to me . . . No, don't tell them what flight, but do tell them Mrs. Mannering will also be going . . . Goodbye, Josh."

Plender put down the receiver.

"All cut and dried," Mannering said. "I suppose you're right."

"I'm sure I'm right. Don't forget the other side of the coin, John."

"What do you see in your crystal ball?"

"You're really not yourself over this," Plender remarked, and suddenly became very serious. "Can I trespass on our years of friendship, John?"

Mannering said slowly: "Of course."

"Is Lorna's attitude worrying you?" When Mannering didn't answer, Plender went on: "I mean, is her attitude about this affair becoming an obsession?" When Mannering still delayed answering, Plender added almost desperately: "I know I'm jumping in with both feet, but if you are worried about Lorna, that would be more than enough to prevent you from concentrating."

"Is it as obvious as that?"

"It's obvious that something's wrong. I've known you and Lorna argue, I've even known you quarrel, but last night there was a chill of aloofness between you that could almost be called one of estrangement!" Plender looked at him in mild, almost comical embarrassment. "John, I handle domestic problems by the dozen, and I really know the signs. One of the most significant facts is that a lot of couples drift a long way apart before they realize it. If they saw the signs early enough they'd do something in time."

"So it *is* as obvious as that," Mannering said heavily.

Plender dabbed his forehead.

"It's so damned difficult to be objective about a friend. John, there's a lot of truth in the old cliché about a trouble shared being a trouble halved. Would it help to tell me about it?"

Mannering was sitting very still in his padded chair. Now that Plender had stopped talking the silence was absolute, for high up in this new modern block there was sound-proofing and air-conditioning, and beyond the window only the blue sky above the dome of St. Paul's. Slowly, he began to speak.

"At first I thought I'd upset Lorna over this particular matter, but it's beginning to look as if she's had something on her mind for months. With luck—" he paused, and then repeated: "With luck, we'll be able to sort it out between

here and Australia. If not, then I'll need all the help you can give me." He sprang to his feet and looked out of the window, down onto St. Paul's and the spare, new buildings about it, the streets which seemed so narrow and the cars which seemed so small. "I can't believe it's serious."

Plender didn't speak.

Mannering thought: But Toby does.

He stared up at the clear blue sky, the wisps of cloud, and the streak of white vapour which betrayed the presence of an aircraft which he could not see.

He looked out of the window of the four-engined V.C.10 upon a sky as cloudless and as blue as it had been over London, but now they were nearly five miles up on a flight which seemed as smooth and steady as a bird's. Between him and the window Lorna leaned back, dozing. But was she dozing, or simply keeping her eyes closed so as to make it difficult for him to talk? There had been some long, long silences on the flight, and she had 'slept' much more than usual when travelling.

A stewardess approached, tall, pretty, nicely made-up. She smiled at Mannering, bent over him and whispered:

"You'll soon be able to see Sydney, Mr. Mannering."

"Oh, good. Thanks."

Lorna stirred, and opened her eyes.

"What was that?"

"We're approaching Sydney."

"That was quick," Lorna said. "We've only just passed Brisbane." So she had been asleep. They leaned towards the window, looking on one side over hilly country and the brilliant blue of the Pacific, on the other side over flat, yellowish land dotted here and there with farmsteads, cut by roads which went surprisingly straight. Gradually, the dark

mass of the city came within sight, and in a few seconds they were able to pick out the great bridge which spanned the harbour, the scattering of small houses built into the hillsides, the valleys, crowded too with houses; the deep green of trees, and the paler green of grass throwing all into relief. The roofs as well as the walls of many of the buildings were brightly coloured. Soon they could distinguish the brilliance of flowers, smoothly laid lawns and gardens. Winding through the hills was the harbour, which seemed to have a thousand inlets, each dotted with small craft. Some groups of yachts moved fitfully, sails stretched by a shallow wind. In the bays the surf rose with lazy grandeur, washing the golden sands. The water of the harbour, with those countless inlets, had a depth of blue that was almost unbelievable.

Suddenly the harbour and the steel mass of the bridge disappeared, and were replaced by the sky-scrapers of the city, the parks, all the heterogeneous muddle of a great metropolis.

As their aircraft circled the city, the stewardess repeated:

"Fasten your belts, please ... No smoking now. Fasten ..."

The landing was perfect, the Customs and Immigration formalities were soon over, and as they walked to the airport buildings, Lorna put a hand on Mannering's arm.

"Are you glad you've come?"

"I hope I'm going to be," said Mannering.

"You won't—" she began, but a fellow passenger drew alongside and began the usual small talk. A tall Australian also joined them, hoping, he said, they would have a wonderful time in Australia. He pressed a card into Mannering's hand. "Anything I can do, sir, just telephone me—don't hesitate."

"I won't," said Mannering mechanically.

Lorna's hand tightened on his arm.

"Look," she said.

Mannering had already seen the television camera and the group of reporters, and he knew that the problems here would be as acute as they had been in London. Was he glad he had come? It wouldn't take much of this surging mass of newspapermen flinging their questions at him to make him wish the idea had never entered his head. But it was over at last, and they were in a taxi driving swiftly towards the city, held by the fascination of visiting a place they had never been to before. It was like any great metropolis, and yet it held an individual quality that was peculiarly its own. The streets were choked with traffic and with people, and the taxi seemed to turn a dozen times before slowing down outside the Hotel Australia.

Outside was an old man carrying a placard. At first it looked as if he was a newspaper boy who had sold out of papers, but in fact it was not a newspaper placard. It read:

POMMIE—GO HOME

A doorman came forward, followed by a porter. The reception clerk was as sleekly dressed as any in London. The formalities over, he handed Mannering a bundle of letters.

"Here's your mail, Mr. Mannering."

Surprised, Mannering took it. A porter led the way to the lift, and very soon they were in a room high above the city, overlooking a park beyond the roof-tops of another wide street. Mannering stood with Lorna for a few moments, then forced himself to say:

"If we could get the Brutus business settled, we would enjoy Sydney."

"Yes," she said, and looked steadily into his eyes. "You're

not going to try to persuade him to deny that he asked you to bid higher, are you?"

"I've come to try to find out whether I did as much harm to him as you think," Mannering said, and before Lorna could go on, before they could start discussing Nathaniel Brutus, he turned to a table and began to open the letters. Most had a New South Wales postmark — Newcastle, Bondi, Manley, Cowra, places he had heard of only vaguely.

In the first was a newspaper cutting from the Sydney *Globe* — the same wording exactly as that in the London *Globe*. Pinned to it was a slip of paper:

MANNERING — GO HOME

There were twenty-seven letters. Twenty-four were similar to the first, and the words 'Go home, go home' began to make a refrain in his mind. Two were from dealers whom he had met in London, welcoming, friendly. One was from a firm of auctioneers he had heard of, inviting him to a preview of the goods for sale at Melbury House. The three business letters did little to ease the disquiet and the sense of oppression which the others had created.

Lorna read two of the 'Go home' letters, tossed them aside, dropped onto the bed, and said:

"So it was a mistake to come."

"That's what we're going to find out," Mannering said. There was a tap at the door and he called "Come in" but it didn't open; then there was another tap. He moved across and opened the door. There was no thought of danger in his mind, only awareness of his mood, and of Lorna's, and exasperation with her as well as with himself. The first realization of trouble came when he caught a glimpse of a bearded man throwing something at him. He had no chance to dodge, no time even to raise his arm to save his face.

Something light struck his cheek, there was a little crack of sound, then vapour bit at his eyes and his nose and his mouth.

CHAPTER NINE

"GO HOME"

As Mannering staggered back, pain screaming through him, Lorna cried out behind him, and there was a scuffle and some shouting outside the room. Mannering was oblivious of it, oblivious of everything but the clawing agony and the fact that he could not take breath without drawing the pain down into his chest and his lungs. Hands at his eyes, he felt as if he were going round and round and would fall, as if he were losing his senses. Suddenly he was vaguely aware of strong hands supporting him, of voices, of being half-led, half dragged across the room, of being forced to sit down. The voices became clearer.

"It's not acid."

"How can you be sure?"

"It would show by now. It's tear gas."

"Tear gas!"

It was agony.

There was the sound of running water, of splashing, then firm hands touched his sides and his ribs. He was being thrust forward. The pain seemed to worsen, tearing scorching pain. There was pressure at the back of his head.

Lorna said: "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Gently."

"Won't it hurt?"

It was *agony*.

"Not so much. Here, let me do it."

"No, I—I will."

Mannering was just aware that his head was being held over a brimming wash basin. Then his face was thrust into the water, very gently. *It was agony* He started back, but the man he had never seen held his head so that he could not get away.

Gently, gently, the cooling water touched him.

Slowly, the pain eased.

It seemed a long time but in fact it was not very long before he was able to think coherently, could take an intelligible part in what was going on. First, he was moved back, then helped to stand up. Next his jacket was taken off and his collar and tie loosened; the front of his shirt was ringing wet. He saw vague shapes reflected in the mirror.

He said croakily: "I'm all right."

"Take it easy," a man said. He had a deep, rather harsh, unmistakably Australian voice.

"Can you see?" Lorna demanded tensely.

"I'm—I'm beginning to."

"I told you, it was tear gas," the man said. "How about moving into the bedroom, Mannering?"

"All right."

The man supported him. As he went he could make out the shape of the window and of the wardrobe, the bed, the chairs. It was a large room. Soon he could make out Lorna, although her face was blurred. The man appeared huge. He began to talk, and at first it seemed like a monologue, as if he were talking to Lorna, but gradually it dawned on Mannering that he was speaking into a telephone.

". . . Yes . . . No, he's not hurt . . . You bloody fools . . . Well, look for him, he had a false beard . . . yes, false . . . He looked about sixty and moved as if he was thirty . . . I'll

be talking to him soon . . . No, not badly . . . No, he doesn't need a doctor as far as I can tell . . . Tell the bloody newspapers what they can do with themselves."

There was a rattle and a ting as he rang off.

He turned to Lorna, and now there was no rancour in his voice, no trace of the roughness with which he had spoken on the telephone.

"The basket got away."

Lorna didn't speak.

"What's it all about?" the man asked.

"I wish I knew," Lorna said bitterly.

"Are you telling me you don't?"

"Yes, I am."

"That's hard to believe."

Mannering made himself interrupt. His throat was sore, his mouth parched, and they hadn't thought of offering him anything to drink. So the words came out hoarsely and with difficulty.

"It's the truth."

Lorna swung round from the window. "John!"

"I could do with some water," Mannering said.

"Oh, what a fool I am!" Lorna hurried out of the room, while a very big man stood near the window studying Mannering, who could now see him much more clearly. A plain-clothes policeman was a plain-clothes policeman in either hemisphere, and equally welcome.

"So you don't know what it's about?" he said.

"Only what I read in the papers," said Mannering. He knew that it would be some time before he felt himself again, but he was free from the fear that serious injury might follow the attack. "Presumably policemen read the newspapers."

The man grinned. "When they have the time." He had a broad, ruddy face, an aggressive chin, eyes of periwinkle

blue, a full, not very well shaped mouth, a comparatively small, well-shaped nose. "I'm Inspector Wetherby. C.I.B. That doesn't seem to surprise you."

"It doesn't," Mannering said.

"Why not?"

For the first time since the attack, Mannering felt like smiling.

"I've heard you and I've seen you," he said.

Wetherby's rather big, very white teeth made his grin startlingly noticeable.

"Always recognize a copper, eh?"

Lorna came in with a glass of water, and Mannering saw that it was slightly tinged with a pink mouth-wash. When he took a sip, it was warm and soothing. He knew that he must look as much of a wreck as he felt, but at least his mind was working.

"That's just right," he said.

"I shouldn't talk," advised Lorna. "I should rest."

"I'm all right," Mannering said, and went on irritably, "Why doesn't someone sit down?" Both of them sat. "Why did you come?" Mannering asked the detective.

Wetherby said: "Still telling me you don't know?"

"We don't know," Mannering insisted with restrained vehemence.

"Then it's time someone told you," Wetherby said. "Two people telephoned the *Sun* and a third telephoned police headquarters. They all made threats on your life." His eyes bored steadily and Mannering knew that the man was appraising him very closely, trying to make sure whether the announcement was indeed a shock.

Mannering said disbelievingly: *"What?"*

"Oh, God," Lorna said, and it was like an invocation.

Wetherby turned from Mannering to her, and raised his

hands, then dropped them. There was a humorous twist to his lips.

"I accept it, you *didn't* know."

"Who made the threat?" demanded Mannering.

"I wish we knew."

"How seriously do you take it?" Mannering asked.

"The question is, how seriously do you?" said Wetherby. "We don't want a prominent visitor from England in trouble or in danger, do we? It wouldn't be good for public relations." He was still smiling, as if at some inner knowledge. "We thought you would know what the threats were about."

"I haven't the faintest idea why anyone should want me dead."

"Who says they want you dead?"

"You did," Lorna interpolated sharply.

"I said there were three telephone calls, which may have been made by the same person, uttering threats against your life if you didn't go home to England. And the joker who threw that tear-gas phial could have been the man who uttered the threats. He didn't try to kill you. The letters—" Wetherby motioned to the littered desk—"don't threaten to kill you. They tell you to go home." He studied Lorna's face first, then Mannering's. "Who doesn't want you here?"

"I still don't have the answer," Mannering said.

"How about Brutus?"

"Would he care?" asked Mannering.

"I don't believe he would do this kind of thing," Lorna said.

It passed through Mannering's mind then that Lorna sprang very quickly to the defence of Nathaniel Brutus, but he did not dwell on it. He was trying to imagine why anyone other than Brutus might want him to go home, and why

they should go to such lengths to make him. He had a strange feeling: that it was all a gigantic hoax—from the beginning of the affair to this moment there was something unreal and artificial about it, except for one thing: it was actually happening.

"Brutus might care," Wetherby said.

"What do you know about him?" Mannering asked.

This time, Lorna didn't speak, but Mannering had the impression that she waited tensely for the answer.

"Nathaniel Brutus, Reform School boy made good."

"Reform?" Lorna gasped. "He said—"

"Orphanage," Wetherby finished for her. "A euphemism, Mrs. Mannering. I don't say he didn't have a raw deal. He was fifteen when he was caught stealing a sheep, out near Cowra. He was sent to the Reform School. No one really knows where he came from, all they know is that he ate about half of that sheep before he was caught." Wetherby smothered a laugh. "Don't give me that look, Mr. Mannering. It usually comes with the reminder that half our original population was transported for stealing sheep or less. The fact remains that Brutus was two years in the Reform School, and that he got work on a little sheep station when he came out."

"In spite of his record?" Mannering said, incredulously.

Lorna was staring at the detective intently, even suspiciously.

"Yes, sir. Station hands are hard to get, and if you work on one you don't need to steal sheep, you can take as many as you need. Brutus worked until the old farmer gave him a tenth share. That's common practice out in the sheeplands. And he kept on working. You know the truth about Nat Brutus? He had the Midas touch. He went from one fortune to another—always in sheep. Today that man owns

more sheep than any other single person in Australia, maybe in the whole world. And they're *his*. He cared so much about being sent away for stealing one sheep he set out to own more sheep than anyone else. And by God he did it. He acts timid and in some ways he is timid, but if he sets his mind on a thing, he does it. If I read the papers properly, he set his mind on getting something in England, and you stopped him." Wetherby paused, moved to the table, picked up several of the letters and let them fall again, fluttering. "Brutus employs a hundred hands—boundary riders, sheep herders, grazers, stockmen, maintenance men, cooks. He could have arranged for all these letters. I don't know anyone else who could, or would—if you don't."

"I don't," Mannering insisted softly.

"Surely, if he's done this you could prove it," Lorna said.

"We can try," said Wetherby. "It's not easy. Say Brutus saw two or three men when he landed in Sydney a day or so ago—they could get this moving overnight. Drop a word here, make a telephone call there—'Send that bloody pommie Mannering a go-home letter, cobber,' and the grapevine would spread it fast."

"So he might out of spite want to make me go back?"

"Why don't you use a stronger word? Say revenge." Wetherby shifted his position. "You want some advice from me, Mr. Mannering?"

"I can guess what advice you'd give."

"I can't stop you guessing."

"Mannering, go home," Mannering said.

"That's right."

Mannering gave a short, sharp laugh.

"I certainly will, when I've finished what I came to do."

The shrewd eyes seemed to narrow and go dark.

"What did you come to do?"

"Find out if Australia and Australians can tell a real antique from a fake," Mannering said lightly.

"My God," Wetherby growled. "You bloody pommies, you think you own all the culture there is. You come over here and look down your patrician noses and you talk as if we were a lot of bloody savages. You make me sick." He turned to Lorna. "If he won't see sense, you work on him. If he goes on like this someone *will* want to cut his bloody throat or hang him up by his braces." He swung round, towards the door.

Mannering moved swiftly for the first time since he had been attacked, so fast that Lorna darted back, and Wetherby missed a step. Mannering reached the door first, barring Wetherby's path.

"Out of my way," Wetherby growled, "or I'll have you put inside to cool your heels."

"If anyone's going to cool his heels in jail you are," Mannering said. "The C.I.B. doesn't like men masquerading as detectives any more than the C.I.D. does." As he spoke, he saw the glint in Wetherby's eyes, saw the man throw himself bodily forward. Mannering snatched at his outflung arm, gripped and hoisted. One moment Wetherby looked massive and menacing enough to crush a giant; the next he went hurtling back into the room and thudded against the wall. Almost before he reached the floor, Mannering was running through his pockets, tapping his waist, beneath his arms, along his legs.

"At least he's not armed," he observed.

CHAPTER TEN

LOVE OR HATE?

As Mannering straightened up from the fallen man, Lorna seemed to look at him as if at a stranger, yet he did not have the feeling that he had so often experienced lately; that she was criticizing him. Now that the crisis was over, his knees felt weak and his eyes began to water anew, the pain at his throat spreading to his chest. Lorna moved to him quickly, and put her arm round his waist.

"Come and sit down," she said.

"Watch—him," muttered Mannering, but the words were almost incoherent. He sank down in a large easy chair, looking at the man who had called himself a detective from the Criminal Investigation Bureau. The man's eyes were closed; he might be unconscious, but he might only be dazed, in which case there was a chance he might be dangerous.

Lorna put the glass to Mannering's lips. He drank a little, and then spoke slowly. His raw, sore throat made his voice rasp, but at least the words were intelligible.

"I've been wondering about him since the other man escaped so easily. And he was too fond of wild talk—no policeman would talk as freely as he did, unless he were drunk." Mannering hesitated. "I wonder whether he's too fond of Brutus—or whether he hates him."

"Hates?" echoed Lorna.

"If someone wanted to convince me that Brutus was behind the 'go home' campaign, this chap couldn't have chosen a better way."

"I still don't understand how you knew he wasn't a policeman."

Mannering said drily: "I've known a lot of policemen, and he just didn't fit in. And he didn't show any card of authority, or try to identify himself—a policeman always does, it gives more power to his elbow. I ought to see what's in his pockets," Mannering added.

"You stay here," Lorna said. "I'll have a look." She straightened up, and there was more fondness in her expression than there had been for a long time. "It's ages since I've seen you in action, John."

"I'm too slow, these days," Mannering said ruefully.

She half-laughed. *"Slow!"* She turned her back on him and went to the man on the floor, bending down, obviously intending to go through his pockets. Mannering saw the man's eyes flutter, and he cried:

"Look out!"

As he sprang up from his chair, the man thrust both hands upwards, palms spreading over Lorna's chest, pushing her backwards. Pain and the unexpectedness of the move made her stagger into Mannering, sending him sprawling against the chair. The fake policeman leapt to his feet and jumped towards the door, hand stretched out to open it, head turned to see what threat there was.

Lorna had collapsed into Mannering's lap.

The big man wrenched the door open and went rushing out, slamming it behind him. His footsteps thudded along the passage, but Mannering, gasping for air, could hear them only vaguely. Every breath he drew sent pain stabbing through his chest, his lungs, his whole body. Lorna pulled herself to her feet and ran to the door, but she must have realized that she was too late. She glanced up and down the passage, and came back, looking utterly dejected.

"John, I'm terribly sorry."

"Probably just as well that happened," Mannering said. "I'm not fit to knock any sense into him, and he would have led us a hell of a dance. At least there was no threat of real violence. I wonder—" He broke off.

"What do you wonder?"

"Forget it."

"John," Lorna said, "if we can't be frank with each other in a situation like this, we really *are* heading for trouble."

The way she spoke and the way she looked at him brought Mannering to the present with a jolt. She was facing the truth of the estrangement between them, and she was absolutely right.

Mannering forced a smile.

"We are indeed. I was wondering whether that merchant came to defend Brutus, or to damn him."

"You've a lot of experience in deducing motives."

"Yes. I wouldn't like to say what I think about him, though."

"You'd like to think he came to damn Brutus, wouldn't you?"

Carefully, Mannering made himself ask: "What makes you think that?"

"Well, you *are* so prejudiced."

"Am I?" Mannering considered. "I don't think I am. I think I'm quite objective. If I have a preference—" he hesitated, then laughed, and said: "Of course I have a preference."

"Ah," said Lorna, as if she was glad that he had been honest with himself.

"I would prefer Brutus to be absolutely innocent of all this conniving," Mannering said, and realized how much that took Lorna by surprise. "If he's done this, if he had

some ulterior motive in coming to Quinn's you'd hate it, wouldn't you?" When Lorna didn't answer, Mannering went on: "Then so would I."

She stood looking down at him, and he believed that this was a moment of new understanding, a melting of the tensions which had built up between them. Lorna actually began to move her hands towards him, and the expression in her eyes had the warmth he knew so well.

The telephone bell blared out.

Lorna said: "Oh damn!"

Mannering almost said: "Let it ring."

Lorna turned towards it quickly, almost angrily, and snatched it up.

"This is Mrs. Mannering."

There was a moment's pause, then, suddenly, her body grew tense, her fingers tightened on the receiver, and she darted a glance at Mannering, who felt alarm stab through him.

A moment later, she said: "Who are you?"

Mannering thought he heard a man laugh; he was sure that he heard the click of the receiver. Slowly, Lorna turned to him. It was hardly necessary for her to explain.

"I'm to tell my husband to go back to England, or—"

"Or what?" asked Mannering with forced quietness.

"Or the next time it will be corrosive acid, not tear-gas," Lorna said.

In fact, no threats had been received at police headquarters; but several had been sent to the newspapers, and next morning two of them carried darker headlines.

One said: THREATS TO FINE ART DEALER.

Said another: GO HOME OR ELSE . . .

Mannering had slept soundly, Lorna had also had a good

night. A pretty little Italian girl who brought their morning tea obviously, and to their relief, knew nothing about them. Mannering's eyes were clear; apart from a slight hoarseness he felt none the worse for the tear-gas attack. They went down to breakfast, but unlike the Italian girl, most of the people in the dining room paid them special and unnecessary attention, their waiter said, "Yes, Mr. Mannering," with every other sentence, and a burly man in a corner, devouring a large steak, three eggs and a pile of bacon, hardly took his eyes off them.

As they were going out of the dining-room a waiter approached them.

"Telephone for you, Mr. Mannering."

"Oh, thank you."

"I'll go out and get a breath of air," Lorna decided.

Mannering went into a booth; a girl said: "It's Superintendent Cartwright for you, sir," and at once a man spoke in a deep yet rather detached voice.

"Mr. John Mannering?"

"Yes," said Mannering.

"I'm Superintendent Cartwright, C.I.B.," the man said. "Will you come to see me, or shall I come to see you?"

Mannering said: "What time shall I come?"

"Name your own time," said Cartwright.

It was then nine forty-five.

"Eleven o'clock," suggested Mannering.

"Just tell your taxi man you want the new police headquarters," Cartwright said.

The new headquarters proved to be an old factory, refurbished and made suitable for the police force which served a city larger than any in Great Britain except London. Mannering had dropped Lorna off at a corner of Liverpool Street, and then watched the traffic and the people, noticing

the similarities and yet the inescapable differences between this and England's capital. There seemed a greater contrast between the very new and the fairly old, but although he absorbed these things he was also alert to the possibility that he might be followed.

He did not think he was.

There was a noticeable casualness about the plain-clothes man he met, a camaraderie more immediately apparent than at the Yard. A Detective Sergeant with an enormous paunch pushed open the door of a room marked: *'Superintendent Cartwright'*, without tapping. Two men were inside the room, one young, spruce, alert, the other sitting behind the desk, much older, grey-haired, benevolent looking and very relaxed.

The older man nodded to Mannering and continued to speak to the younger one.

"Right then, Pete, you go and smoke the basket out, and if you need more men, call Ted and tell him to get a move on. Tell him I said we want it done, quick."

The younger man turned away, his dark eyes summing Mannering up in swift appraisal as he went out. The Sergeant said:

"Mr. Mannering, Skipper."

"Dead on time, too." Cartwright sat back in his chair and studied Mannering. Satisfied, he stood up and held out his hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Mannering, and thanks for coming. Take a pew."

Mannering sat down.

"Had any more threats?" asked Cartwright. He had a tough skin with a deep tan, and a curiously gentle expression.

"How many do you know about?" asked Mannering.

Cartwright smiled broadly.

"The one by telephone last night, and the one in person yesterday afternoon."

"Do you know all about the one that got away?" said Mannering drily.

"No. Tell me about it." After Mannering did so, the Superintendent went on in a growl: "Why didn't you tell us about that right away. Aren't you scared enough?"

"Not yet," Mannering said. "Do you think I ought to be?"

"I don't know enough about it," answered Cartwright. "All I know is that someone is trying to frighten you enough to drive you out of the country, and anyone who utters threats and menaces is breaking the law, which means I want it stopped. What don't they want you to buy?"

Mannering said: "I haven't come to buy anything."

"You've come for the Melbury House Sale, haven't you?"

"Yes," Mannering said, and after a pause he added: "Ostensibly."

"What's the real reason? Brutus?"

"I'd like to find out if he's what he pretended to be."

"Don't waste your time. Nathaniel Brutus doesn't pretend anything. He never has." Cartwright opened a folder on his desk, took out a duplicated document and handed it across the desk. "There's his dossier, you can keep that copy."

"So he's got a record."

"No," said Cartwright. "But he's twice had trouble with con men, and as a result we've built up a picture of him. One man robbed him of half-a-million pounds, selling fakes supposed to be by Picasso, Matisse, and so on. Doesn't sound much if you say it quickly, does it? The con-man was English, and he borrowed a knighthood to make an impression. The second con-man sold Brutus fifty thousand

pounds-worth of old masters which someone in a Chelsea, London, England, cellar had painted. He was English, too. So he's on the record as being suspicious of the English."

Cartwright was half-smiling, wholly serious, and very watchful.

"I don't blame him," Mannering said. "I'm beginning to understand a lot of things. What's he really like?"

"Honest. Naïve. Too trusting, especially where the arts are concerned. Very Australian. And he's got the Midas touch and millions of sheep." Cartwright shifted his position. "And you aren't interested in the Melbury Collection."

"I wouldn't have come specially for it," Mannering said, "but I'll go and have a look now that I am here."

"Have you come to see anything else? I mean have you given anyone advance notice that you're interested in any particular thing?"

"No," said Mannering.

"Mannering," Cartwright said, "I don't like calling any man a liar."

Mannering sat very still.

"I know what you've come for," the Australian said.

Mannering didn't speak.

"We hear plenty," went on Cartwright, "even about what happens in London. You've come to look for the Melbury Picasso." When Mannering still made no comment but sat staring at him blankly, the C.I.B. man went on with some loss of assurance. "If you succeed, it won't be any mud in our eyes. Good luck to you." Into the cold silence which followed, Cartwright went on heavily: "Goddammit, Mannering—we know you saw Venella Melbury in London. The moment we heard you were coming we knew why—and we anticipated trouble."

Mannering made himself speak calmly.

"There was the man who pretended to be a C.I.B. officer. You know what I did to him." He paused for a pregnant second. "I'd like to do the same to you at this moment."

"Now Mannering—"

"But I won't," Mannering said. "Get a few things clear, will you? I do not know Venella Melbury, I have never heard of the Melbury Picasso. I've told you everything I can. I am not, and have never been, interested in any particular picture or *objet d'art* on this trip."

Cartwright pursed his lips, before saying gruffly:

"I take back all I said. We know from servant's gossip that the Picasso picture, Black Day, was stolen six months ago. Venella Melbury said it had been shipped out for exhibitions in the United States, but that was to cover up the loss." After another pause, Cartwright went on: "Forget it, will you?"

"I can't forget it soon enough."

"Goodo!" Cartwright shifted in his chair. "Well I'm sorry, all the same. I hoped that we would find out what this is all about." He spread his hands. "The Melbury Collection is a very old one by Australian standards and over the years there have been a lot of rumours that half of the major pieces are fakes—or stolen from owners who had no right to them, anyway, and couldn't make a fuss. This could have been a way of making sure you couldn't find out if this is true."

"Other dealers could," Mannering said.

"Unless there happens to be some particular article only you would know about," Cartwright said. He touched another folder. "This is *your* dossier. The Yard told us a lot about you, and your fame had reached here without that. You're the dealer most likely to know about stolen *objets d'art*, or jewels, or—" he slapped the folder. "It could still

be an attempt to keep you away from Melbury House."

"Not Nathaniel Brutus, getting his own back?" Mannering asked.

"Could be that, too. When are you going to Melbury House?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Let me know when you go," said Cartwright. "I don't want the case of the murdered art dealer on my hands." He paused long enough to allow that to sink in, and then went on. "And tell me if there's anything I can do for you while you're here, won't you?"

"Yes," said Mannering. "Thanks. And here's one thing for a start. Why did you think I'd come to look for the missing Picasso?"

"It would add up—after Venella saw you in London."

"I've never heard of Venella Melbury."

"My information is that you met her," Cartwright said. "I don't know—"

A man came in, unannounced, nodded to Mannering, and said to Cartwright:

"They got Willy Smythe."

"About time," said Cartwright, gruffly. "I'll be with you in five minutes." He looked at Mannering with an apologetic manner. "Smythe's an escaped convict with a bad record of violence. I have to see him soon. Anything more I can do for you?"

"Yes. Where does Brutus live, and how do I get there?"

"Baratta, northern New South Wales, close to the Queensland border," answered Cartwright. "The only good and quick way is to fly. You could drive, but a lot of the roads are little more than bull dust, they've had no rain up there for nearly a year. A charter plane's best. Or train to Brisbane, then by charter plane. Any of the airline offices will

lay it on for you." Cartwright stood up, proving to have a surprisingly flat stomach and narrow hips in spite of his huge chest. "Do one thing for me, will you?"

"For you—or for the police?"

"The police."

"If I can do anything, I will."

"Have a good look round when you go to Melbury House, and if you see any sign of faked or stolen stuff, let me or the Melbourne police know. If it's Melbourne, ask for Castle —Superintendent Castle."

"What makes you think there's stolen stuff at the house?"

"Rumour," said Cartwright. "Gossip. Scandal. Old Melbury, who owned the place, stole everything—from other men's wives to their reputations. So he wouldn't have objected on principle to ill-gotten loot. Don't quote me, though." Cartwright grinned broadly, and shook hands. Then he said solemnly: "And be bloody careful."

Lorna looked carefree, her hair a little windblown, eyes bright, as if the city on a gloriously sunny day with a gusty wind had driven half of her cares away. She was in the foyer of the hotel, in Castlereagh Street, and jumped up as Mannering entered.

"Do you feel like a walk, John?"

"Good idea," Mannering said. "Where?"

"I've discovered the old part of the city, near the bridge," Lorna told him. "Almost underneath it, as a matter of fact. It isn't far—about twenty minutes' walk. Have you seen Martin Place yet?"

"No."

"We'll go that way," Lorna said. "It's really impressive."

Soon, she led him to the corner of Martin Place, and they paused for a moment, gazing at the massive buildings, solid

enough to weather many centuries. Slowly they traced their way along the narrow streets, flanked by buildings which would have looked old in any city, until they reached a lane leading to the harbour. Here they could see the sun glinting on the broad stretch of water, waves whipped to white horses by gusty winds. A big liner was sailing with aloof majesty under the vast span of the bridge.

As they went, Mannering told Lorna what Cartwright had said to him—including the story of the missing Picasso.

Walking with her he was alert for the slightest sign of trouble, watching the cars which came towards him, the people who seemed to dawdle in their wake. But nothing untoward happened; there was no threat nor menace nor hint of danger. They chose a different way back and found themselves on a tiny triangle of green opposite a building which was being demolished. Near this stood a taxi.

"We've walked long enough," Mannering said, and hailed it. Five minutes later they were opening the door of their room. All thought of danger had gone out of Mannering's head, for the walk and the short drive seemed to have drawn him and Lorna closer together.

He pushed the door open.

On the instant there was a concerted rush, by half a dozen youngish men, some of them with cudgels.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUICK WORK

MANNERING saw the youths over Lorna's shoulder and realized she would bear the brunt of the attack. He flung her to one side, hunching his shoulders, protecting his head

with his arms. A blow struck him on the wrist, sharp and painful, another fell dully on the top of his head, and someone kicked his knee. He had the awful feeling of helpless fury as he grabbed a man's arm and twisted without getting a proper hold. As the man jerked himself free, Mannering thought of Lorna, praying that she had got away.

Then, stillness came.

He heard a shout, as of alarm, followed by heavy thudding and a cracking sound. Feet and legs moved like pistons in front of him, then passed by. Someone said in a satisfied voice:

"No you don't!"

Mannering turned round, and saw the incredible; four youths, handcuffed together, one bleeding at the nose, another with a swollen eye. Four much bigger men were also there, including the young, spruce and dark-eyed one who had been in Cartwright's office. This man raised a hand to Mannering. Lorna was in the passage, bending over a fifth youth, who lay apparently unconscious.

She looked up, obviously unhurt, and saw Mannering, flashing him a quick glance of reassurance.

The C.I.B. man said: "Sorry we were a bit late, Mr. Mannering. We knew the slobs were here but we wanted to catch 'em red-handed. They'll get twice as heavy a sentence for assault as they would for breaking-in." After a fractional pause, he went on: "You all right?"

"Next time you want an Aunt Sally, leave my wife out of it, will you?" Mannering said, but the rebuke did nothing to discomfort the Detective.

"You could always send her home," he said, but it was not meant offensively, and he grinned.

Painted on the walls, smeared over the furniture, white-

washed on the windows, scrawled on placards stuck in every corner and on every available surface, were the words:

POMMIE, GO HOME

"The truth is, you would be better off back in England," Mannering said to Lorna.

"The truth is, you would hate it if I went," retorted Lorna. "And I would hate it if you stayed here alone. As the police seem to be taking very good care of us, I've a much better idea."

"When this is all over I'll have a word with Cartwright," Mannering said. "They could have disfigured you for life." Already a bruise on her cheek was very red, it would be dark and painful in the morning. Gruffly, he went on: "What's this better idea?"

It was an hour after the police and their five prisoners had gone. The Mannerings were in another suite, their belongings moved in, everything back to normal. Lorna was sitting in a small easy chair, her legs up on a pouffe, a cup of coffee in her hand. Mannering was standing by a window overlooking Castlereagh Street.

"John," Lorna said, "don't misunderstand me, will you?"

"I'll try not to."

"I think I ought to go and see Brutus on my own."

Mannering was so startled that he didn't respond.

"Darling, listen," Lorna went on. "He's so full of prejudice against you that he wouldn't be reasonable, he'd just want to throw you out. Whereas I might be able to talk sense into him."

Mannering just saved himself from saying that it was a marked concession to admit that Brutus wasn't being sensible. He made no comment.

"Do you think he would listen to you?" Lorna demanded.

"I doubt it, especially if he's behind this campaign."

"Even if he is, I might be able to reason with him," Lorna argued. She seemed to brace herself. "But that's absurd. I'm quite sure he knows nothing about it." She put her cup and saucer down and leaned forward, her brows knitted together, her hands tightly clenched. "John, what else *can* we do?"

"If Brutus is behind these attacks you could be running into danger."

"Oh, nonsense! Everyone would know where I was going, he wouldn't take it out on me and make sure of drawing attention to himself. He's not a fool."

"Would you still want to go if you knew for certain he was behind the attacks?"

Slowly, thoughtfully, Lorna said: "More than ever, I think." Then, after a short pause, she repeated decisively: "Yes, more than ever. John, you put the spark to a flame of positive *hatred* of England and the English. If you go up there you're bound to make the situation worse. I might make it a lot better."

"A little patriotic flag-waving," Mannering said, and the accompanying smile could not rob the words of tartness.

"*I* don't mind flag-waving," Lorna retorted. "Nor do you. And there are personal things at stake, remember. We don't exactly want to go home to a lawsuit, and a badly tarnished reputation, do we?"

Mannering forced a laugh.

"I see what you mean. When do you intend to go?"

Lorna's eyes lit up.

"You don't mind, then?"

"I'm afraid you might be running into trouble but I

think you're right in one way. Brutus won't harm you while you're up there." Mannering wanted to add: "I wonder why you really want to go," but he restrained himself. "And the police must know in advance."

"Of course!" cried Lorna.

There was no shadow of doubt that she was genuinely eager to see Nathaniel Brutus. Mannering was a long way from certain that he knew the real reason.

"You go to Baratta," he said. "I'll go to Melbury."

Lorna raised no objections, and seemed to think that was a good idea. Within ten minutes she was on the telephone, inquiring about a charter plane, while Mannering wondered what she would say if he had told her of Cartwright's suspicion—that the real source of the trouble was at Melbury House.

Before they could speak again, the telephone bell rang. Mannering noticed that Lorna went tense as he stretched out for it.

"Mr. Mannering . . . this is the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Television News. We wonder if you could come along to the studios tonight, for . . ."

Forty-eight hours later, Mannering turned a hired Rover into the Civic Centre at Canberra, and kept his eyes open for a parking place. He had had some trouble finding his way; now, as he saw the arcades on either side, vaguely like the Rue de Rivoli in Paris, he wondered if, in the city, it would be any easier. He slowed down at traffic lights, and a policeman came towards him.

"Good evening, sir."

"Hallo," said Mannering. "I haven't done anything I shouldn't, have I?"

"No, sir. We've been on the look out for you. There's a

message for you at headquarters from Superintendent Cartwright of Sydney. Have you booked your hotel?"

"No."

"There's a very good motel out on Federal Highway, the New Willows," the policeman said. "I'd go along there and register first, if I were you; there's a medical conference in town and the hotels are pretty booked up. Then if you would telephone this number and ask for Superintendent Horro."

"Horror?"

"Without the third 'r' sir. Horr-*o*."

"Thanks," said Mannering. "And thanks for recognizing me."

"Saw you on television last night, sir," the policeman explained. "You'll be recognized everywhere you go. Very good performance if I may say so."

"Kind of you," said Mannering.

He followed directions carefully, saw the way the receptionist at the New Willows Motel looked at him, humming and hah-ing until suddenly she said:

"It *is* Mr. John Mannering, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, you're just lucky, sir . . ."

It was a pleasant room, with everything he needed, but he wondered if it were pleasant enough to outweigh the disadvantage of being recognized wherever he went. He had taken it for granted the interview would be seen only in Sydney; he should have made sure. He called the number, and was put through to Superintendent Horro at once; obviously the call had been anticipated.

There were the usual pleasantries before the policeman said:

"There's no need for you to come out here, Mr. Manner-

ing. I can tell you what Cartwright wants you to know. The five men concerned in the assault at your hotel all told the same story—that they were paid ten pounds each to rough you up. The man who paid them was an old boundary rider who comes into Sydney for a month every year."

"From where?" asked Mannering.

"Baratta," answered Horro.

"Brutus?"

"Brutus is the biggest station owner near Baratta, and the town lives off him, but a lot of shearers and boundary riders work for smaller stations. They're the ones who don't like regular work, seasonal hire suits them best."

"Does Cartwright know where this man is now?"

"He went on a drunk, and God knows when or where he will turn up," said Horro. "He's probably bedded down with a bottle and a doll, and won't be seen around for a couple of months." After a pause, Horro went on: "Is your motel all right?"

"Very comfortable, thanks."

"Why don't you come for a drive round in the morning?" suggested Horro. "I'll be glad to arrange a driver and a car. You needn't take too long." When Mannering didn't answer at once, he added: "Do you have to be at Melbury House very early?"

"I've no appointment," Mannering said. "I'd like that drive very much."

Just after a trencherman's lunch next day, he started off for Melbury House, along roads which were now familiar, over the artificial lake and the new bridge, the war memorials and the War Museum, the Government House and the new government buildings. This was still a city in embryo, yet one which was already growing fast. He had an impression of spaciousness and gracious nationalistic pride.

"A little flag-waving," he had said to Lorna.

There was a lot of flag-waving here.

He wasn't thinking of flags as he drove towards Melbourne, through empty dry-looking countryside sparsely covered with scrub and saplings, a few matured trees which looked stunted, as if they thirsted for water to make them grow. It was hot—hotter than he had so far known in Australia. The road was good if rather narrow. He came to a fork and turned left, then began to slow down. If he had taken the right direction, he would soon see a sign to Melbury House. It appeared against the skyline, just a pointing finger. As he approached it he could make out To MELBURY HOUSE in faded black lettering on weather worn white paint. This road was very narrow, and of a dry, pale orange dirt. Dust billowed up behind the car and he began to understand why Cartwright had recommended flying.

For a while the road ran through a barren wilderness, but suddenly he breasted a rise, and found himself looking down over wooded land, in the middle of which was a vast clearing. The road ran stonily through eucalyptus trees, some of the trunks gnarled and massively contorted into all manner of writhing shapes.

Suddenly, Mannering drove into the clearing, which gave an impression of strange emptiness. The house was only a few hundred yards away, impressive, turreted, made of brick which must have been brought a long way. It was huge, a mansion in any country. The drive leading to it was paved, although the paving was badly holed and broken, showing all the encroaching signs of neglect. Two or three cars were parked in front of the house. There was no shade, just the glaring sunlight on shiny roof and bare earth. He pulled up by a flight of wide, shallow, stone steps, wondering whether

he was being watched, and then suddenly sure that he was.

A woman was standing at the side of a window, half-concealed by long curtains. Probably she thought she could not be seen, but Mannering both saw and recognized her.

She was the woman he had talked to by the side of the Thames; the woman who had told him she was a reporter on the *Talebearer*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PREVIEW

MANNERING walked up the steps, half-expecting a footman to open the door, wondering whether the woman had expected him, whether she would hide. Was she, in fact, Venella Melbury, or had she spoken the truth at their brief encounter in England? And if she *was* a reporter on the *Talebearer*, then had she followed him from London, or was she here as a guest, on behalf of her magazine, or for some reason he didn't yet know. The fine iron-studded doors were closed, as tightly as at any moated castle, and the bell was of the old fashioned iron 'pull' type. He pulled, but instead of the bell ringing sonorously above his head, the door slowly opened. Beyond was an enormous hall, medieval in style, with a wide stone staircase leading up to a gallery. Impressive pictures lined the walls, at least a dozen of them. Above the fireplace, which looked as if it had been carved out of one piece of granite, was a head and shoulders portrait which sharply drew Mannering's attention.

It was magnificent.

It was a masterpiece.

It was by Gainsborough.

He was so held by it that for at least a minute he stood staring up, trying to recall where he had seen it before. Only half-believing, he remembered an illustration of it in a book called *Great British Portraits*, and after a few moments he remembered the gist of the caption heading the photograph: The Fourth Duke of Melbury, in the Melbury Collection, Melbury Castle.

Melbury Castle was one of the finest old castles of England, one of the stately homes which had never been allowed to decay.

A woman spoke in a voice he knew he was unlikely to forget.

"So you really appreciate a great painting, Mr. Mannering."

Mannering glanced round at the woman whom he had seen at the window. She wore a light cotton wrap, and her legs were bare, her feet thrust into a pair of leather thongs, held on only by a single strap between her toes. Her hair was loose and she was altogether different from the heavily made up and beautifully dressed woman he had seen near the Thames.

"The sad thing is that no one can paint like that today," he said.

"Not even your wife?"

"She would be the first to admit it."

"But you're not very gallant."

"You know that already, surely."

She laughed, gaily, naturally; in spite of her casual dress, this house seemed the right setting for her. Once again he had the impression that she was laughing at him.

"I should, shouldn't I? Aren't you seething with curiosity?"

"About the treasures here—I'm overflowing."

"I meant about me."

Mannering smiled at her, and answered: "Well, no. Either you belong here, and were fooling me in England, or you've come here for your magazine or for one of the prospective buyers."

"No other possibilities?"

"They seem the most likely."

"Which one do you believe in most?"

"I suspect Melbury blood in you," said Mannering. "Give me five minutes to consider, will you?" He moved away from her and stood in front of another portrait, then another and another, until suddenly he stopped by a full length portrait of a youth in his teens, dressed in the fashion of the Regency. The likeness was unmistakeable.

"Now you know," she said. "I am Venella Melbury."

"Yes. Why the London deception?"

"It wasn't wholly a deception. I do write. I am a freelance. I wanted to find out more about you, and the *Talebearer* Editor gave me an assignment. You didn't let me find out much."

"Why were you interested in me?"

"Because you'd done Nat Brutus down."

"A lot of people might come to believe you," said Mannering drily. "Why are you so interested in Brutus?"

"He's a multi-millionaire." Her eyes were brimming over with laughter.

"There are other multi-millionaires."

"Not on my doorstep. Not with a yen for antiques. Not with a mind which will let him spend half-a-million pounds on jewels he's hardly heard about."

"All these things I can believe," Mannering agreed.

"I would like him to buy most of the—what word did you use?"

"Treasures."

"I would like him to buy most of the treasures here."

"Why?"

"To keep them in Australia. Some of them have been here for a long time."

"Why do you have to sell them?"

"To clear off family debts. It's quite a family. I'll tell you all about it one week when we have a few days together. In the simplest of terminology, George Melbury—my second cousin—came from a branch of the family which began on the wrong side of the blanket in about seventeen-eighty-one."

"Ah."

"I don't wish to shock you," Venella went on sweetly. "But our progenitor really was a bastard."

"So were a lot of dukes' and princes'."

"Could *you* boast one in *your* family tree?"

"I daresay, if I tried hard enough."

"Anyhow he didn't get ducal rank as a birthright, and presumably he was hustled out of the country—I mean England—with a lot of sheep stealers, and stealers of bread," Venella said.

"You've made your point. George's forebear came with the first settlers."

"Settlers!" Venella echoed, and laughed. "You know, I could get to like you!"

"I must be very careful," Mannering said drily. "Was he transported with these paintings, too?"

"Most of them," she answered. "His mother was a very highly placed lady and there might have been a lot of unpleasant scandal, even for that day and age, if the blow of transportation had not been softened by a good share of luxury. He was no fool, and it didn't take him long to make a great deal of money. He acquired paintings and antiques

and *objets d'art* worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. Unfortunately his four times great grandson—"

"I beg your pardon."

"His great-great-great-great grandson, who was the last owner of this house and everything in it, was a great great-great great gambler too, in stocks and shares and prospecting and banking. He died in an air crash about a year ago, and left debts of three-and-a-half million pounds."

Mannering caught his breath.

"Now I remember! He put a lot of money into Indo-Viet."

"And the new Indo-Vietnese Government took everything over without compensation," Venella finished for him. "He thought he'd bought the mineral rights, instead he bought some pretty pieces of paper."

"I see," said Mannering. "Hence the sale here."

"Hence the sale."

"Will it pay off the debts?"

"It should even leave some over for the members of the family."

"Including you?"

Venella did not give a direct answer.

"Sooner or later you will come to believe me when I say that my real interest is to see that the treasures are kept in Australia. One man who might keep them in one place is Nathaniel Brutus. To persuade him, I would do anything."

"Anything?"

"Yes," Venella said simply. "Anything. I would write his biography as a great Australian, or sleep with him, or be his permanent mistress. I would even marry him. John—may I call you John?"

"Please. Conditionally."

"What condition?"

"That I may call you—"

She laughed: "Bitch would do," she interrupted. "Is my Australian outspokenness very shocking?"

"Your naïveté is," Mannering said. "After all, this branch of the family began because someone didn't insist on the proprieties. Is Venella the name you're called by?"

"Yes."

"Venella, you were about to give me an awful warning."

She frowned. "Warning? I—" her face cleared. "Oh, yes. I was telling you I would do anything to keep these treasures in Australia. And I mean *anything*."

"Such as murder, for instance?"

"Such as murder."

"I really believe you mean it," Mannering said slowly.

"John, darling," Venella Melbury said, "you can take it from me that I *do* mean it." She slipped the buttons of the wrap open, and let it fall aside to show the briefest kind of bikini. She had a quite beautiful body, tanned to golden colour. "In my lust to keep these treasures in Australia I am quite ruthless, brazen, remorseless and unrepentant."

"That I believe, now," Mannering said. "And if you can seduce me you can afterwards blackmail me into not doing anything you don't want me to."

"How right," Venella agreed cheerfully. "This house is full of suitable beds in rooms with peepholes and servants who take pretty pictures. I wouldn't have told anyone else that but I'm sure you would guess. Would you like me to take you to your room now?"

"Please."

She slipped her arm through Mannering's, lightly, and tossed her wrap over a chair which had all the appearance of being a genuine William and Mary, polished by the seats of the mighty.

"I always assumed that I would be able to persuade you

easily," she went on, taking him towards the stairs "I saw you as the typical Englishman, steeped in old-school-tie tradition and conventional behaviour, ready to do all the accepted things such as habitual unfaithfulness to your wife —you're not at all what I expected."

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry about that," said Mannering.

"Nor do I, yet."

They went up the magnificent staircase, past the walls made of blocks of stone which looked like granite. The windows were larger than those in any medieval castle, otherwise everything was there except the rushes, and to represent these were thick straw mats. Reaching the gallery, Mannering paused to look over the rail into the vast hall.

"Does it make you feel nostalgic?" Venella asked.

"In a way."

She smiled, her face mysterious and powerful with the suppressed pleasure of a triumph as yet to be revealed.

Solemnly she opened a door in the centre of the gallery, leading him into a long room flanked with show-cases, a dozen of them, the panelled walls hung with beautifully displayed medieval sixteenth- and seventeenth-century weapons. In the show cases were *objets d'art* of every conceivable kind, jewellery, small pieces of insignia, old scrolls, illuminated addresses, everything one might expect to find in a well maintained museum. As they walked slowly round the room, Mannering noted that a very large number of the exhibits were virtually priceless.

"And these are for sale?" he asked almost humbly.

"Buyers are coming from all corners of the world to carry them away," Venella answered, with a sharp note in her voice. "If they have their way, that is."

"Go on."

"*If* they have their way, this collection will be split up into a hundred fragments. Some will go to Europe, some to America, some to Japan—most of the big cities will have a little, just one small item that will hardly matter to them. Each treasure will be lost in a miscellany—imagine any *dozen* of these in the British Museum. What difference would it make? What impact on the Londoners who waddle round on their big flat feet, or to the sticky mouth kids who drop their ice-cream papers on the floor?"

Mannering protested mildly.

"You're not really being fair."

"Fair!" she cried. "Is it *fair* to break up this collection? Is it *fair* to rob Australia of so much of the culture, of the beautiful things which belong here? *Fair?* What do you know about being fair? You hated the idea of an Australian buying the Alda insignia so much that you lied and cheated him out of it. Don't talk to me about being fair! And don't buy anything here, do you understand? Don't take anything away from here."

Much more warily, Mannering said: "I'll be one of dozens of buyers, remember."

"But you're the only one I *know*, and you'll bid higher than most, if you really want a thing. So if I can scare *you* off, I'll go a long way towards keeping the prices down, so that Australian collectors and Australian museums can have a fair chance. Does that make sense to you?"

"I think you overrate my importance," said Mannering slowly. "But how do you propose to work on me? Scare me away by inciting a gang of Sydney hoodlums to attack me, and to beat up my wife as well?" There was more heat in his voice than he had intended, anger suddenly clutched him. She stood gazing at him, open-mouthed, and he gripped her

arm and actually shook her. "Go on! Answer me! Is that the way you plan to get your fair chance?"

As he stood glaring, he was aware of movement behind him, and as she didn't answer, he turned his head. A youngish man was half way between him and the door, a powerful youth wearing a white T-shirt and red shorts. He was tanned to a mahogany brown. The muscles of his arms and legs rippled, the thin interlock cotton did little to hide the power of his shoulders.

He headed straight for Mannering.

"Mannering," he said, "I'm going to teach you not to put your filthy hands on *my* sister."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CRACK OF THE WHIP

MANNERING did not turn back to Venella, but watched the youth's approach. The other was not as tall as Mannering. He was not particularly good looking, but there was a marked resemblance between him and at least two of the portraits in the hall. He moved with the springy resilience of one who was magnificently fit. His eyes were clear, his lips were closed, and he was breathing easily.

Mannering said: "Stop him, Venella."

"Nothing and no one will stop me," young Melbury said. He was only two show-cases away now, approaching more slowly but with absolute relentlessness.

"Stop him," Mannering said again.

"Ralph," Venella said in a taut voice.

"You keep out of this," ordered Ralph Melbury. He was near enough now to reach Mannering in a couple of strides.

There was something cat like in the way he slowed down, and then came on a step at a time. His hands were bunched, his biceps bulging, the muscles on his forearms stood out with quivering strength.

Mannering said: "I warned you."

"Warned!"

"Ralph," Mannering said, "did you hire those louts in Sydney?"

"Ralph!" Venella repeated, "Did you?"

"Supposing I did? If he'd had any sense he would have gone home."

"Did you hire them?" Venella almost screamed.

"Yes, I did!" Ralph bellowed at her. "I ought to have made them break his neck! I ought—"

He jumped at Mannering.

Mannering thrust out his right leg, driving his foot towards Ralph's stomach, and Ralph did the obvious thing, thrusting a hand down to grip the ankle. Mannering drew his leg away swiftly, and Ralph, off balance, clutched at thin air. He lurched forward, his head and shoulders unprotected. Mannering locked his hands, raised them, and brought them down with tremendous force onto the back of the youth's neck. Ralph did not groan or grunt, but flopped down in a heap; he lay inert, arms sprawled over Mannering's feet.

Mannering drew away, looking at Venella. It was impossible to read the expression in her eyes or on her face; she was transfixed and horrified, but whether at what she had learned or at the total defeat of her brother, Mannering could not guess.

She began to tremble, in a state of shock.

"Take it easy," Mannering said quietly.

She didn't look at him, but murmured:

"I didn't know."

"What didn't you know?"

"That he'd hired anyone to attack you and—and your wife."

"I'm very glad you didn't."

"I swear I didn't." After a pause, Venella went on with a gulp. "Is she—is your wife all right?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't she come with you?"

"She's gone to see Brutus."

That startled Venella, making her look away from the inert body on the floor and into Mannering's eyes.

"*Brutus?* Why?"

"She wants to convince him that what you call 'doing him down' was with the best of intentions. She didn't like what I did at Catesby's either."

"Your *wife* didn't?" Venella sounded unbelieving.

"I get mixed up with some peculiar women, don't I?"

Venella moistened her lips.

"Will Ralph be all right?"

"If I haven't broken his neck."

"My God. You haven't!"

"He looked quite capable of breaking mine," Mannering reminded her. Then he saw the horror in Venella's eyes, relented quickly and went on: "He'll be all right, where's the nearest bathroom or shower?"

Venella looked dazed for a few moments, and then seemed to comprehend. She turned towards a door at the end of the room. Mannering bent over Ralph, steadied and poised himself, then hoisted him in a fireman's hold over his shoulder. He followed Venella along a wide, stone-walled passage. This was hung with rush mats, carpets, paintings, masks and drums from the South Sea Islands, Fiji and New

Guinea, all strangely impressive. Two doors along, Venella turned into a room, and a moment later Mannering stepped into a bathroom with two open showers, and two closed closets. Ralph Melbury was heavier than he had anticipated, and handling him was more difficult than he wanted Venella to realize.

He lowered the youth into one of the showers, and saw his eyes flickering. He allowed Ralph's knees to bend until he was squatting beneath the spray, pulled the glass door to, leaving just room for his hand to reach the cold tap. Leaving the door partly open he backed away, bumping into Venella.

"The fool," she said fiercely. "The silly bloody *fool*. He actually did *that*."

Above the hissing of the water, Mannering said:

"At least he did stop short of murder."

"If you knew the kind of yobs he mixes with in Sydney you would realize how lucky you are," Venella said, and there were tears in her eyes; tears of anger. "Do you know why I'm not one of the executors? Because of Ralph. He must have been born bad." Still fiercely, she went on: "Ever since he was a boy at school he's been irresponsible. He'll do anything for a kick, anything to get money for nothing. For years he sponged on my cousin and then—do you know what his fine Sydney friends put him up to? Stealing some of the jewels from here, and selling them. *That's* what my precious brother did. He became a miserable thief. It finished my cousin—and he had been father and mother to us both since our parents died—I can hardly remember them, they died so long ago. From that day until the death of my cousin, Ralph never came here again."

She was really crying now, and every impulse in Manner-

ing made him long to believe that they were genuine tears, but—were they? Her voice faltered:

"I was too soft with him. I know it, and my cousin knew it. But he *is* my only brother. And my cousin kept me short to prevent me from giving Ralph money, prevented me from having any say in handling the estate because he couldn't trust me not to give it to Ralph. And then—then when he died he was so much in debt, that now we have to sell everything."

"Are you and Ralph the sole heirs?"

"Yes, except for small bequests. Oh, it's hopeless! But to think Ralph would do this—" She sniffed, rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, and then suddenly yanked open the shower door and shouted: *"You—bloody—fool!"*

Ralph Melbury was trying to get to his feet. Water streaming off him, into his eyes, his mouth, down his fine body. The shower sprayed over Mannering before he managed to turn the water off.

"Get up, get dressed and get out," Venella said furiously. "Get *out*. Don't come back. If you're seen anywhere about during the sale, I'll—I'll tell the police about your Sydney cobbers. Get *out*."

Almost blindly, Venella led Mannering out of the shower room, along the passage, and to another door on the left along the semi-circular wall. She flung it open.

"This is yours. I hope it's good enough for you!"

As she swung round and ran along the passage, he thought that she was crying. He looked after her until she disappeared, then gazed curiously round the room, noting the high ceiling and painted brick walls, the wall-to-wall carpet, the heavy oak furniture, the cumbersome four poster bed. In a corner by the window was a doorway leading to a bath

room large enough for a small apartment. Mannering looked quickly inside, then went back into the main room, and saw his two bags—a suitcase and a hanging clothes-bag, on a luggage stand, together with his brief case. So there were servants about. He was glad to take off his jacket and shirt; a shower would be a good idea. He glanced out of the window, and saw a terrace in several serried stages; at the bottom was a swimming pool glistening and inviting.

Suddenly, Venella appeared—running He could not see her face, but saw her dash her hand across her eyes. Without a pause, she reached the edge of the pool and dived in. She disappeared beneath the water, broke surface, and began a furious crawl which sent her cleaving the water at terrific speed. Mannering smiled rather grimly, turned to his case, rummaged for a pair of bathing trunks, showered, slipped into the trunks and then pulled on a pair of slacks and slid his feet into slippers. He took the key from the inside of the door, locked it from the outside, and strode along the passage. Not far away was a secondary staircase, and coming up it a small, dark-haired man, obviously Southern European.

"Which way do I get to the swimming pool?" Mannering asked.

The dark eyes were puzzled for a moment, then understanding dawned.

"Swim pool, yes, sir!" He had a gentle voice, a beautiful complexion, a nicely proportioned body in a close-fitting pale grey suit. "This way, please." He turned and ran lightly down the stairs, and along several passages. If Mannering had been by himself he would certainly have got lost. The other man opened a door which led to one side of the terrace, and now he could see the swimming pool, and

Venella still moving through the water at the same furious speed.

On one side were some open huts, with raffia curtains. Stepping inside the first one he came to, Mannering slid out of his clothes, and approached the pool. Venella was slackening speed slightly, but her pace was still remarkable. He waited until she made a racing turn, then dived in, unnoticed, just behind her. She was definitely slackening speed, and he had no difficulty in catching up with her. He paced her for a length of the pool, and they turned together. That was when she caught sight of him. She leapt up into the air, dropped, went under, and came up spluttering. She was only a little out of breath.

"What are you doing here?"

"Cooling off."

"I didn't see you come."

"There are a lot of things you don't see."

They began to tread water, for this was the deep end. Venella bobbed up and down very easily and obviously didn't give a thought to where she was.

"I can see through *you*," she said.

"Like you saw through Ralph?"

"That's just the kind of thing a bloody pommie would say."

"Tell me something, Venella."

"If I want to and if I know the answer."

"You know the answer. Ralph isn't interested in keeping the treasures in Australia, is he?"

"No."

"Then why is he so anxious to get me out of the country?"

"*I* don't know."

"I think you do."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the sound of eddying water, as Venella, closely followed by Mannering, swam towards the side of the bath and hung on to the rail.

"You're right," she said. "I know the reason."

"What is it?"

"There's a dealer in Sydney who would like to pick up a lot of the sale goods here on the cheap, and he doesn't want too many big overseas buyers. Ralph thought he could kill two birds with one stone -please me, and make a dishonest thousand quid or so on the side."

"Would it really interest him to please you?" Mannering asked.

Venella frowned, moved back without any effort, and answered quietly and with obvious feeling.

"Too right it would please him. He's my kid brother, I'm his big sister. We can quarrel, we can even fight, but don't let a third party start interfering." Her eyes flashed. "And that goes for you."

"I can imagine," Mannering said. "If Ralph tries any tricks against me or my wife again, I will show you how interested a third party can get. Venella, I don't really understand your reasoning. You want to keep the Melbury Collection in the country. You think that Nathaniel Brutus is the only man who both could and would do it. You know I might take some of them out of Australia, but you also know I'm not the only overseas buyer to show interest. A punk like the man who is bribing Ralph might think that scaring me off would scare others—he might even think that if he succeeded with one he could deal with the others in the same way. But *you* don't think like that. You may believe your body beautiful could be used against me, you might even be prepared to pop into bed with me, or anyone else for that matter, if you thought it would help you. But you can't

seriously think that you could work that way on half a-dozen or so men."

She was still hanging onto the rail.

"You may underestimate me," she said, and there was a glint in her eyes.

"I may underestimate your prowess, but not your mind. Why d'd you really want to talk to me? What do you think I can do for you that others can't? There must be something."

After a long pause, Venella let go of the rail and sank slowly into the water until she floated face upwards, keeping still with only the slightest motion of her hands. Mannering let himself fall forward, and floated towards her, then turned slowly on his back.

"What is that something?" he demanded.

"If you've such a brilliant mind, why don't you guess?"

"I don't want to guess if the answer is what I think it is."

"What you think—what *do* you think?" she turned her head towards him.

"That you believe I might still be able to influence Brutus."

Venella caught her breath so sharply that she took in a mouthful of water. She began to struggle, turned over, splashing and spluttering, and then gradually recovered until she was able to speak.

"I might really get to like you," she said again. "I could never trust you, though, you're too clever by half. All right, I think you could influence Brutus, even after what you did to him. I certainly want you to try. He might listen to you. After Catesby's I don't think he will, but he might."

"Venella," Mannering said, "why won't he listen to you?"

"Oh, you fool!" Venella said. "You big sap-headed English fool. I'm the last person in the world Nat Brutus

will listen to, especially now. *I* made him go and see you. *I* told him that the great John Mannering was the one dealer in the world whose integrity was absolute. So he went to Quinn's, and you won him over. That evening after he'd first seen you he was bubbling over with satisfaction, because I was so right." She caught her breath and grabbed at the rail again to keep herself up. "You should have heard him after the auction! Do you want to know the whole truth? He's afraid he will be swindled. No one ever trusted my cousin, Brutus least of all. He's afraid he will buy a load of junk if he comes here, or else be landed with a fortune of stolen goods. He wanted an adviser, a counsellor and friend —someone money wouldn't dazzle, who would know the odds, know if goods were stolen or if they were fakes."

She was bobbing up and down with rage as she spoke, and spluttered so much that she could hardly get the next words out. Mannering made no attempt to speak, and at last she recovered enough for him to understand what she was saying:

"And you, the great trustworthy John Mannering, the English gentleman, whose word was better than his bond, sold him down the river. You were so determined not to let those Alda jewels go to a raw Australian, you pretended not to hear what Brutus said. If you would do that, what were the chances you would advise him honestly about the Melbury jewels? How does he know you haven't come to take *these* treasures out of Australia because you think Australia's too crude for culture? *That's* the problem, *Mister* Mannering. Have you got that into your head?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

MANNERING felt sure that Venella Melbury was absolutely serious. There was an underlying note of passion in her voice and in her bearing. She threw the words at him as if in challenge, then suddenly turned, and hauled herself out of the pool. Her long, slender legs, the whole of her body, were quite beautiful, but the thing which most caught his eye was the speed and grace of her movements. She rose without effort reached the side, spun round and glared down at him.

"Did you hear me? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Mannering hoisted himself out of the water; he was conscious of the fact that he took twice as long as Venella and put more exertion into the task, but at least he didn't have to struggle over the tiled edge.

"I heard and I think I understand," he answered.

"You only *think!*"

Mannering said sharply: "Would you rather I give you a slick answer, off the top of my mind? Or do you want a considered reply?"

She was almost abashed, on the instant.

"Considered," she admitted.

"Then answer one or two questions." Mannering was aware of the hot sun drying him quickly, and moved towards the shade of an enormous red umbrella, but Venella stood in the blazing light without giving it a thought. "Do you

seriously believe that I think Australia has no right to this kind of possession?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, you're wrong."

"You made sure we didn't get the Alda insignia."

"Do you seriously think I would prefer British treasures to go to America rather than Australia?"

"That's the evidence," Venella declared.

"Well, don't be taken in by it. If I had a choice I would certainly keep that kind of historical relic in England. But we have to sell a lot of treasures overseas, and if I've a preference, it's for selling to a Commonwealth country. America has a lot of British tradition, so I would rather they went to America than Japan, say, or France. But that's only one aspect of it."

Venella said sardonically: "You're telling me."

"What's on your mind now?"

"The biggest penny."

"Venella," Mannering said, "you've got too many things wrong. I can't alter the governing factor that the highest bidder gets the goods, but—"

"Don't stick your neck out, *Mister* Mannering," Venella interrupted, but her manner had thawed slightly.

"—But in a dozen, in a hundred cases of private sale I've allowed jewels and antiques, a great many precious things, to go to the man who cared for them rather than to the collector who simply wanted possession." As he stared at Venella something seemed to click in his mind, an answer to a problem which was satisfying to himself even if it would not satisfy everyone. He went on almost pompously although with absolute conviction: "These things don't belong to any nation. We have our emotional reasons for wanting them in one place or another, but in fact they belong to the world."

"Crap," Venella said.

"Really believe it's crap?"

"If you think that, you're fooling yourself."

"I do think it," Mannering said. "And I'll go on thinking it, but I'm not going to spend time trying to convince you. If I have to convince anybody, it will be Nathaniel Brutus. I've seen all I want to, here."

"You've only seen half of the collection!"

"I haven't seen a fake or a stolen piece," Mannering said, and then he laughed. "But you're right, I ought to see the lot before I can advise anyone to buy. How wealthy *is* Brutus?"

"Very wealthy," answered Venella.

"Could he buy all the Melbury Collection?"

"He could buy four Melbury Collections without selling a single sheep."

"I think I ought to go and see him at once," Mannering decided. "How long will it take me to drive from here? Do I have to go to Brisbane first?"

"You can't drive to Baratta from here without using the worst roads in Australia," Venella told him. "Do you really want to go?"

"Yes."

"I'll take you by air," Venella offered. "We'd better leave at dawn, so you'll have time to look at everything in Melbury House twice." She paused. "Did you really believe much of the Collection might be stolen?"

"I half-believed it," Mannering said. "Venella, what happened to your Picasso?"

The question took her absolutely by surprise, and she stared at him open mouthed. He thought she was going to give him an evasive answer, but slowly her eyes cleared and her surprise died away.

"Who told you about that?"

"The Sydney police."

"It's no business of theirs," she said. "It's no business of yours, either."

That was all she would say, but she must have realized that Mannering felt sure he knew what had happened—that her brother had stolen the Picasso.

If he had indeed stolen it, the truth would come out sooner or later.

It was half-past ten that night.

Mannering and Venella stepped out of the library of Melbury House, into the great hall. No one was in sight; except for their breathing and for their movements, there was no sound. Lights shone startlingly over each of the great paintings. Little numbered stickers, catalogue numbers for the auction now only a week away, were now attached to the frames. Venella said wistfully:

"If only it could stay like this."

"You really love the place, don't you?"

"Every stone, every window, every floorboard, every room, every part of it." She turned to Mannering. He had never seen her more beautiful; the light was absolutely right for her, and the colour in her eyes took on an almost golden tint. She wore a low-cut dress of some diaphanous material. It left one shoulder bare, exposing her back and flawless shoulders. As she stood close to Mannering, he felt his heart beat faster, his studied indifference melting away.

"Yes," she went on, "I love it."

"I think I know how you feel."

"You can't," she said. "You're not Australian. You can't imagine what it feels like to *long* for tradition, to want to

create tradition and impose culture—to add greatness to greatness. You simply can't understand it, John."

"It's no use going around thinking you can create tradition —you can't. It just grows. And it's no use thinking that you can impose culture—you can't. It has to be acquired. If you keep up your pretence, the tougher you will find a lot of things. The important thing about tradition is that you come to revere it, no matter how old or how recent it is. And the important thing about culture is to desire it; once the desire is strong enough, the culture comes. You don't have to be a Frenchman or an Italian or an Englishman to appreciate the arts, you simply have to hunger and thirst after them." He stopped, feeling very pontifical, wondering if what he said meant anything at all to Venella.

She kept on staring at him.

Suddenly, she said: "I get the point. Will you go and find out if Nat Brutus hungers and thirsts after it?"

Mannering's heart leapt.

"I want to very much."

After a long pause, Venella said: "So I only had to ask. I didn't have to bribe or blackmail you, or suffer the fate worse than death."

"I'm never really convinced there is such a fate," Mannering said lightly. Seeing the expression in her eyes, he felt momentarily uneasy, and turned towards the stairs: "If we have to be up at dawn, we shouldn't be too late getting to bed."

"No," she said. "We shouldn't, should we? We'll have a night cap, and then I'll leave you and love you."

Mannering turned off the lights of the bedroom, and stepped to the window, looking out at the moon shining on the water of the swimming pool, on the trees beyond it.

There was no movement except a slight ripple of the water, no sound. His mesh window was closed against the fluttering insects, but the main window was wide open. The intense heat had settled down to a pleasant warmth. He undressed slowly, enjoying the mild and temperate air, got into his pyjama trousers, and went into the bathroom. Brushing his teeth, he thought he heard sounds nearby, paused, but listened only to the silence. He wondered in which direction Baratta lay, and whether Lorna was aware of this bright moonlight. It was beautiful enough to make her lyrical, in certain moods. She certainly hadn't felt like being lyrical with him for a long time. Too long a time.

Was he to blame?

Or was she?

Were they growing apart, so that they could no longer see things in the same way?

Had they been all-in-all to each other for too long?

It was a crazy thought. Lorna's near-criticism of him was a passing phase, a natural enough one for a woman in her forties. Once this affair was settled, they would go back to London and would soon start laughing at themselves. He tried to make himself believe that, stepped to the bathroom door and flicked up the switch.

Only the moonlight shone in the bedroom.

He was puzzled, because he thought he had left a light on; then he remembered switching it off, so that he could see the beauty of the night more clearly. Now, the whole room was lit by the moon, and he could not resist going to the window and gazing out again. He stood there for a long time, still thinking of Lorna and the situation between them.

Then he turned towards the looming four-poster bed. He stopped short, astounded.

Venella lay there.

The sheet, only the sheet, was drawn up to her shoulders. Her hair was beautifully groomed, and rested delightfully on the pillow. The sheet moulded her figure. The moonlight darkened her eyes, as she looked towards him.

He remembered vividly what she had said in the hall. "We'll have a night-cap, and then I'll leave you and love you."

He was half way between the window and the bed, naked to the waist. He wanted to speak, but the words stuck in his throat.

"John," Venella said, "come to me."

He didn't move.

"John," she said, "I'm here because I want to be, not because I want to persuade you to do something for me. I'm here simply because you're the most handsome man I've ever known, and because you've the finest body I've ever seen. I mean that."

Mannering said: "Venella, please go away."

"John," she said in a soft, seductive voice, "remember what you said to me about culture. You simply have to hunger and thirst after it. Put it another way: you have to want it desperately. I want you, desperately. Not because you're a man but because you're the man you are. Not only because of your body, there are a lot of fine bodies, but because—" she hesitated, and then slowly turned to face him, every movement considered; as slowly, she raised her arms, pushing the sheet back, until her arms and her shoulders and the mounds of her breasts and the valley between were revealed to tempt him—"but because once I've slept with you, I'll be unique; won't I, John? The only woman you've known except your wife."

He felt the perspiration gather at his forehead, and the stirring in his loins.

"Venella," he made himself say. "You'll only regret it."

"Oh, no," she said. "I won't regret it and I won't ask again. In the morning I will fly you back to your wife, and let you go—I will let you go much more freely if we share this night, than I would if you were to send me away. If you send me away, I'll haunt you."

She stretched out her arms.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"WHAT BROUGHT YOU?"

NEARLY a thousand miles to the north-west, Lorna Mannering stood on the patio of Nathaniel Brutus's home, and looked at the moonswept countryside. The light was bright enough for her to see the patch of ghost gums away to the right, pale and eerie even by day. It showed the buffalo grass of the lawns, and beyond, the near-desert land, with dried-up spiniflex and some mulga trees and patches of coarse grass. She saw no sheep, although that day she had sat next to Brutus in a Landrover, and driven past thousands of them, thick wool stained by the reddish coloured earth which looked too dry for anything to live on it.

"But it keeps me alive," Brutus had said.

She could remember the quirk at his lips when he had said that, almost the first time he had not kept a poker face. He had been courteous enough, made her formally welcome at a small but luxurious house set in bush country which was desert in all but name. Everything was modern, everything was spick and span. He had an elderly housekeeper, a Scotswoman, wife of his station manager. There was at least a dozen aborigines—station blacks he called them—

on the station, and half-a dozen children, apparently all thoroughly happy. Prosperity exuded from every corner, from the pale pink Cadillac to the high frequency radio, from the beds to the colourful Persian rugs. There were a few pictures, all abstract, and one of them was in this room on the wall behind her.

It was Picasso's Black Day. The missing painting.

She turned away from the patio and went into the long room which ran the whole length of the house, furnished in contemporary Swedish style. Brutus sat in an armchair, reading one of the glossy magazines, soft music was wafted from the corners of the room, more like an echo of sound than sound itself.

The mesh door swung to behind Lorna. Brutus looked up, and Lorna almost caught her breath. There were moments when she felt a wild desire to rush to her paints and an easel in an endeavour to capture this man's face and expression. There was a purity of line and colour and a vitality which, merged together, created a face such as she had never seen before.

"What's the matter with me?" he asked, laconically.

"Nothing's the matter with you," Lorna said.

"That I don't believe. I can tell you something."

"I'm sure you can."

"You've got a quick tongue," Brutus said. "Don't let anybody tell you that you married the wrong guy."

Lorna didn't speak. She felt a curious affinity with this man, who so obviously belonged to a different world. No one else of her acquaintance would have sat there, staring with an air which was almost insolence, although she knew that was the last thing to call it. Arrogance of a kind, perhaps, but nothing worse.

"Have a drink," he said, and pointed to the cabinet where

bottles and glasses would have done justice to the *Casino Royale*. He himself was drinking beer. She hesitated, then poured out a Dubonnet, and sat on a square, thong seated stool. Brutus was watching her closely, and once again she noted the brilliant blue of his eyes. "Penny for them," he went on, clipping his words.

She hesitated.

"Truth or nothing," he said, even more sharply.

"You can be the rudest man I know," she told him.

He grinned. "Too right—I deal with men who don't understand anything but plain speaking."

"Women seldom react favourably to the treatment dealt to men."

"The men don't either. They take it, or they get out." Brutus finished his drink and picked up another bottle, which was by the side of his chair. He opened the metal cap and poured the beer into a glass without spilling a drop. "So that's my penny's worth."

"Is it all you want?"

"No," he said. "No, ma'am. I know it's asking for the moon but I want to know what was in your mind when you came in. You looked as if you would like to cut my throat."

"Did I?" she asked, almost wonderingly. "Is that really how you interpreted the way I looked?"

"It was the way you felt."

"If you really think that, it's easy to understand how wrong you were about John."

"We'll leave him out of this."

"He's why I came," Lorna said simply.

"He's not why I let you stay." Brutus drank deeply, and shifted his position. "That's another question I would like to get around to. Why *did* you come?"

"I've already told you."

"The one about coming to ease my troubled mind. Forget it."

Lorna didn't comment, and Brutus said. "Come on, let's have it. What did you think when you came in at that door and saw the digger lying back in the lap of luxury?"

After a long pause, Lorna answered.

"I wanted to paint you."

He jerked up, utterly surprised. "*What?*"

"I wanted to put you on canvas," Lorna said.

"For hell's sake, why?"

"You've an interesting face."

"I don't want any patronage," he said shortly.

"I doubt if you know what you do want," Lorna said, "you're too busy being sorry for yourself, cosseting a sense of imaginary insults—my goodness, you don't know how lucky you were that you came to my husband and not one of the sharks in the business."

Brutus lowered his glass slowly, and exclaimed: "My!" He smiled as if with real enjoyment and repeated, "My, my. So she's got claws."

Lorna controlled the impulse to snap at him, sipped the Dubonnet, and said:

"I have my paint-brushes with me."

"You don't have to keep this story up."

"Nathaniel Brutus," Lorna said, "a painter doesn't have to *like* the subject he wants to paint. I would jump at the chance of painting the Devil if he came in here—or a whore, if I thought her face had anything fresh, or one of your station blacks if he had an interesting face."

"So you want to paint me for my face, not for my sweet self?"

"That is so."

Brutus was silent for a long time, before saying slowly:

"How long would it take?"

"If it went well, a few hours to get the basic work done."

"And then?"

"I could finish it at my leisure."

After another pause, he asked: "How much?"

"We can discuss that if I want to sell it and you want to buy. After all, you might not like the picture I would paint of you."

Brutus chuckled.

"You can say that again. Do you know how much that Picasso cost?"

"If it was more than ten thousand pounds sterling, you were robbed."

His eyebrows shot up.

"Then I was robbed."

"You weren't robbed at Catesby's," Lorna flashed.

"There could be two ideas about that," retorted Brutus. "Would this light be all right?"

"I would much prefer daylight."

Unbelievingly, Brutus said: "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Seven thirty," he said. "Seven thirty. Where will you be?"

"I'll see what the light's like and choose the best place," answered Lorna. She was smiling, quite unable to hide her pleasure. "I'm very glad."

"I'll tell you if I'm glad after I've seen it," Brutus said. He stood up slowly, and looked down on her. There was a change in his manner but she could neither understand nor define it, he reminded her very much of the way John sometimes looked at her at this hour of the evening. Then a thought flashed startlingly into her mind. Immediately her whole mood changed, from her satisfaction at Brutus's

promise to an uneasy kind of awareness that he was very much a man. She had known times when she had been sitting looking up at John, just as she was now looking up at Brutus, and he had suddenly jumped to his feet—as Brutus had—and stood staring down at her—as Brutus was. After a few moments John would move across to her and clutch her shoulders, kiss her with rare passion, and say: "Let's go to bed, my sweet."

And it had always been so.

Now, she felt almost as if Brutus was about to do and say the same thing. He drew a pace nearer, without shifting his gaze; suddenly his eyes blazed, and it was as if he had to exert physical strength not to move.

"I'll tell you one thing," he said. "You're a very beautiful woman."

He strode past her, and out of the room. She heard a door slam. She did not know where it was, she did not move, just stared at the spot where he had been sitting.

She did not know how long she sat there, but suddenly she became aware of a man's footsteps and the clatter of horse's hoofs. So Brutus was going to ride. She had some conception of the tremendous effort he had made to walk past her, and she felt her heart beating very fast. The horse was clip-clopping about, as if Brutus were saddling it; she had seen him ride a grey mare only that morning, fast as the wind. She jumped to her feet and went on to the patio, one part of her mind saying: "Don't be a fool, don't be a fool," the other giving way to an impulse. As she reached the front of the patio, Brutus came in sight at the side of the house, walking the horse carefully across the iron hard turf.

Lorna stood very still, half-hoping that he would not notice her, half yearning for him to turn and look round. He passed, and she thought he had gone. In spite of herself,

her heart dropped. She gripped one of the columns of the patio tightly.

Suddenly, Brutus said: "Hold it, Sarah, hold it." He twisted round in the saddle, and looked towards Lorna; there was no doubt at all that he saw her, the only question was what he would do. For what seemed a long time, she was in doubt. Then he turned the horse's head towards her, and approached. He reached a spot a few yards from the patio, his figure clear in the moonlight but his face in the shadows.

"What now?" he demanded in a taut voice.

"Do you always ride alone?"

"I do by night."

"How often do you start out like this by night?"

She thought she saw his lips curve in a grin.

"Never like this."

"Then how do you ride?"

"Sometimes I'm tired of my own company. So I talk to the stars."

"And your only companion is your horse."

"There's one thing about a horse," Brutus said.

"What's that?"

"You can always be sure he's not after your money."

"And that's not true of people?"

"It's true of a god-damned small minority of people. Especially women."

"I'm not after your money," Lorna said.

After a long pause, he rasped: "What are you after?"

She didn't know. She simply did not know.

Or was it that she knew, and that she was fighting against acknowledging the truth. It was a kind of moon-madness; what else could it be?

"Lost your voice?" Brutus demanded.

What *had* she lost.

"Listen," he said thickly, "I don't know the score in England, sport, but out here a man is a man and a woman is a woman, and when they get the chance they go places together. I walked out on you once, and let me tell you I ain't walking out on you again. You still have the chance to walk out on me, but don't take too long, I might forget my manners. Brutus, they called me. I didn't have a name, so Brutus stuck. Poor little bastard, they used to say, poor little brute. It's not far from Brute to Brutus, or didn't you know that?"

Lorna said: "Why do you torment yourself so much? You're not a brute. You have so much that other men can never have. Don't you realize that?" After a pause she went on: "I don't mean money, either."

"No," Brutus said very slowly. "I know you don't mean money. What are you trying to do? Prove my heart of gold and my code of honour? Don't try me too far." He leaned forward in the saddle and growled at her: "Because you might regret it. You're everything I *can't* have. You're a member of the bloody English ruling classes, you're out of the top drawer, you're out of a world I don't know anything about except that it's as cold as bloody ice. My God! I can't get into your world, that's what your precious husband made me understand. Have you come with yourself as a consolation prize?"

"Brutus," Lorna said, and it did not occur to her that she was using his surname. "There's one thing you ought to have learned by now."

"What particular thing?" he demanded.

"Nothing is unattainable," she said. "There aren't really two worlds, only two halves of the same one."

"My God," he said, thickly, and he sprang down.

"My *God*," he breathed as he reached her.

In the morning he had gone.

In the morning, when a little aborigine girl brought Lorna tea in bed, it was seven o'clock.

At half past seven, she saw him astride the mare, close to the stables.

"I'd like to paint you as you are," she said. "Not on the horse but otherwise just as you are." She had her paints all ready, and it was easy to rig up a make-do easel. As she worked there was magic in her fingers, a magic which passed from them to the brushes and from the brushes to the canvas.

Nathaniel Brutus did not stir during the sitting; he stared at her, and was still staring when a station hand came to report that an aircraft had just signalled that it was about to land.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE PORTRAIT

"THERE it is," Venella said. "We'll be down in five minutes."

Mannering, sitting behind her in the Avro 2, edged to one side so that he could see more clearly over the arid, orange-coloured land, dotted with spindly scrub. Now and again he was able to pick out a little flock of sheep, searching forlornly for food. In the distance he saw a spread of buildings. The early afternoon sun shone on a lorry window, reflecting light. Soon he was able to pick out the modern T-shaped main house, dozens of smaller buildings and one or two sheds on the perimeter.

Venella put the stick down to land.

Mannering saw two people walking towards the yellow and white streamer which fluttered from a tall pole, moving all the time in wind created by a pumping fan worked by electricity. The colour of nearly everything in sight was bleached by the sun, but Lorna's dark hair showed clearly.

As the aircraft made a slow turn, Mannering caught sight of a movement which at first he didn't understand; Brutus had moved closer to Lorna. The next moment the couple were cut off from sight, but something which Mannering had seen out of the corner of his eyes made him lean to the other side.

Brutus had his right arm round Lorna's waist, and he drew her to him. For a moment they stared at each other, oblivious of the world. Ice seemed to enter in Mannering's heart. The next moment, Brutus moved away.

Venella glanced at Mannering, as if to see whether he had noticed; he was aware of her movement but didn't look round. She turned back and went in for a landing. She put the little aircraft down perfectly; after a slight bump or two it taxied towards the banner and to the couple now standing a yard apart and looking towards it. Slowly, smoothly, Venella brought it to a standstill, and a station hand came forward with chocks, then a ladder. Mannering, hardly aware of what was passing through his mind, was the first to climb down. Lorna stood waiting, Brutus came forward, his hands by his side, his lips twisted in a sardonic smile. The chiselled regularity of his features, his rather over-thin face, the curiously clear skin which seemed to glow with health, the fine eyes, were all apparent to Mannering in stark clarity.

"So you had to send a goodwill messenger ahead of you," he said.

"Goodwill?" Mannering repeated.

"You're a lucky man," Brutus said. He hadn't done more than glance at Venella. "She pleaded your case well."

Mannering could not stop himself from saying: "Not too well, I hope."

"Well enough," Brutus declared. They reached Lorna, and there was a momentary hesitation before they touched hands; he kissed her on the cheek. "Hallo, Ella," Brutus went on. "Have you sold yourself to Mannering?"

Mannering caught his breath.

Venella said in a startled voice: "Have I *what*?"

"Don't you go with Melbury House?" Brutus asked drily.

"I haven't bought Melbury House yet," Mannering answered. "The idea is that you should buy it, lock, stock and barrel."

"I will say you two haven't lost much time getting down to business," Lorna put in. Mannering thought she was looking at him with guilty intentness, as if wondering whether he had noticed anything unusual.

He introduced Venella to Lorna and they sauntered towards the house, the sun blazing down on them and heat mirage rippling off the corrugated iron roofs of the sheds. Two children played in the shade of a carport where half a dozen cars stood. They crossed the patio and entered the cool room; bottles, ice and glasses stood waiting. Mannering went straight up to the Picasso.

Brutus said: "Your wife said I was cheated over it."

Would a man who had bought a stolen picture talk like that? Mannering asked himself.

He looked intently at the painting, thinking of all the Sydney policeman had told him about it. He was aware of Lorna, at his side, and of Venella, by the glasses, a bottle already in her hand; she had shown no particular surprise at seeing the painting here.

"I can believe you were cheated," Mannering said. "You're easy to cheat."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" demanded Brutus.

Mannering asked almost casually "Did you want those Alda jewels?"

"By God I wanted them!"

"Why?"

"I liked the look of them."

"Did you know one from another?"

"What are you driving at?" Brutus demanded. As Mannering turned to look at him, he went on: "And you're supposed to be the gentleman of this outfit—you're supposed to be the aristocratic son-of-a-bitch who—"

Mannering thrust his left arm out, gripped Brutus by the shoulder, and held him at arm's length. He saw bewilderment in the brilliant blue eyes. He felt Lorna touch him, heard her catch her breath, knowing she had wanted to say something, but managed to stop herself. Venella, a glass in one hand, a cube of ice in tongs in the other, was watching.

Mannering had an almost overwhelming impulse to smash his fist into Brutus's face. He had a vivid mental image of the way the man had put his arm round Lorna, and the possessiveness of his manner; the impulse became a burning desire.

He said: "Take that back."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You may be Australia's gift to sheep but you don't call me a son of a-bitch, now or at any time in my hearing." When Brutus didn't respond but stood there as if he were baffled, Mannering gripped his shoulder even more tightly. His urge to strike the other had faded, but he knew that if Brutus did nothing to back down then he would have to strike him. Then, suddenly, the whole situation appeared

utterly ludicrous; and in that same instant he knew why he had flown into such a rage.

He was jealous of Lorna—wildly jealous.

What would *she* feel if she knew that last night—?

Brutus was saying something, and Mannering made himself listen, and let the other go.

"—in Australia son-of-a-bitch is often meant as a compliment," Brutus was saying. "Can't you take a compliment?"

Venella called: "Who's for a drink?"

"I'm for a drink," Brutus said. He went on with a grin which took the sting out of his words: "That's when I've made this son-of-a-bitch tell me why he's asking so many questions." They all moved towards Venella, and Lorna crossed to help her; it was strange, Mannering thought, but Lorna seemed almost as if she were the mistress of his house.

That was a lunatic thought.

"I'll have a gin and lime, long," he said gruffly.

"Beer," said Brutus. When the glasses were in their hands, he went on: "Goodo, Mannering. Let's get on with your shock tactics. What makes it so easy to cheat me?"

"You," Mannering answered.

"Nat," said Venella, as she put a glass to her lips, "don't try to outsmart John Mannering with words. No one ever succeeds. I tried to, and I make a living out of using words."

"He can twist them better, can he?" Brutus asked drily.

Mannering chuckled; it was easy, after all.

"John," Lorna said, "don't get off on the wrong foot again." She looked at him almost pleadingly. "I think that Mr. Brutus is now convinced that you hadn't any ulterior motive at Catesby's."

"I can even believe you had some unselfish ones," Brutus declared. "What's the matter, John?" He drawled the name,

making it sound rather like 'Jahn'. "Have you run out of reasons?"

"Could you tell one piece of the insignia from another? Distinguish the Order of Chivalry from the Order of Valour, for instance? Distinguish the jewelled Sword of Desire from the Sword of the Flesh? Tell the Spanish from the Polish honours? Or—"

"Don't parade my poor bloody ignorance in public." Brutus was suddenly tight lipped.

"Meaning you couldn't?"

"You know damned well I couldn't."

"That's why you're so easy to cheat," Mannering said quietly. "You couldn't tell the difference, so you put yourself in the hands of a dealer whom you didn't know at all and who was recommended to you by someone you didn't know very well—Venella here. Right?"

"Right."

"So I could have taken you for a fortune."

"But you had your reputation," Brutus objected. There was a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Ever bought sheep?" demanded Mannering.

"Too right I've bought sheep."

"On whose advice?"

"My own, cully."

"Before you knew anything about sheep?"

Slowly, Brutus said: "I went to a reliable sheep man."

"Did you know him?"

"Too right I knew him—I made sure he couldn't fool me or—" Brutus broke off and frowned, then laughed, tossed the rest of his beer down, and turned to Lorna. "You sure picked yourself a husband! All right, so I was in a hurry, so I didn't take as much care as I should have done." When

Mannering didn't comment, he went on: "I laid myself wide open."

"For six hundred thousand pounds sterling," said Mannering. "You couldn't even be sure that bidding wasn't rigged, could you?"

"It wasn't."

"Could you be *sure*?"

"No, except—"

"Nathaniel," Mannering said quietly, "you were dealing in hundreds of thousands, and you were ready to spend the money for the wrong motives."

"The hell I was. It was my own money."

"So you wanted to throw it away?"

"If I'd brought those jewels to Australia they would belong here."

"But a lot of other things wouldn't. If you'd spent three-quarters of a million pounds on the Alda insignia, you would have three-quarters of a million pounds less to spend on a much wider variety of antiques and paintings and *objets d'art*. With that money you could fill a whole museum which would interest a city—instead of filling a single display case which would interest a few connoisseurs and mean no more to anyone else than a collection of fake costume jewellery."

Venella, who had kept remarkably quiet, raised her head and looked at the two men through her lashes. Lorna moved to one side as if recognizing that there was no point in trying to intervene, this argument could only be settled by the men themselves.

"You finished?" Brutus asked, but there was no truculence in his manner.

"Yes," said Mannering, as quietly.

"Like me to be honest with you, sport?"

"Yes."

"You're a bloody lying son-of-a-bitch." Brutus articulated the words with great precision. "That's what you are."

Lorna gasped: "John!"

Mannering said quietly: "What makes you think so?"

"Your *talk*."

"I don't understand you."

"I don't use enough four-lettered words," said Brutus seethingly. "You didn't stop bidding for those reasons. You've thought them up since."

"That is so."

"You *admit* it?" Brutus gasped.

"I never have too much trouble admitting the truth," Mannering said. "I don't mind fooling you but I don't want to fool myself. I didn't say these were the reasons which made me put a spanner in the works, but after the event they make good sense." When Brutus didn't interrupt, Mannering went on: "Want me to try to explain? Or shall we call it a day?"

"Explain," said Brutus promptly.

"Very well, I was in a sweat at Catesby's. I knew what you wanted but I didn't know why, and it seemed utterly wrong. Even bidding up to six hundred thousand seemed wrong, and the 'seven hundred' didn't really sink in until the auction was over. I didn't enjoy what happened afterwards. The whole affair blew up in my mind until it became an obsession. So I came out here ostensibly to look at the Melbury Collection, but actually to find out if you were really interested in buying beautiful things, owning them, gloating over them for their beauty—or whether you simply wanted the satisfaction of possession." Mannering paused, acutely aware of the women looking at him, and added roughly, "I'm here to find out. If Lorna gave you the im-

pression I was on my way to make my peace with you, she was quite wrong. Until half an hour ago I couldn't have told you why I came, but I know now. I came to find out if you simply worship money, or whether treasures like the Alda insignia, like those at Melbury House, really mean anything to you."

Tensely, Brutus said: "And how are you going to find out?"

Very slowly, very deliberately, Mannering said: "Will you let my wife be judge?"

"Your *wife*?"

"Lorna."

For a few seconds it seemed as if Brutus would ask 'Why', and try to avoid the issue simply because he didn't comprehend. Instead, he said very softly:

"Right, sport. Lorna's the judge."

"John—" Lorna began.

"Nathaniel," Mannering said, "just tell us why you bought that Picasso. Lorna will know whether you've the eye and the heart of an artist, or whether to you it's just an outsize in cheques."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE PICASSO

As Mannering finished speaking, Venella moved from the drinks and stood in front of the painting, her head slightly on one side. Lorna moved very slowly away from the men and stood looking out of the window. Mannering was aware of this, yet did not look away from Brutus. He had a strange impression that Brutus was growing in physical stature;

perhaps it was because he was standing against the pale land beyond the patio, so spare and clean-limbed and in a curious way powerful. Certainly nothing suggested any sense of guilt over his possession of the Picasso.

"So you want to know why I bought that picture," Brutus said.

"Yes."

"Because of its title."

Mannering was startled. "Black Day."

"Yep."

"I don't understand."

"That's an admission," Brutus said sardonically. "Here's a thing you don't understand. I'll tell you. It's not."

"Not what?"

"Black."

"Then what is it?"

"Listen," said Brutus. "Listen." He raised his hands, the fingers spread, and then repeated: "Listen, won't you?" Mannering hadn't said a word. Lorna turned from the window and Mannering could see her behind the man, and the expression on her face was tense and strained. Her lips actually moved, and he had the impression that she was trying to put words into Brutus's mind, *willing* him to say the right thing. Suddenly, he burst out: "Listen, Mannering! I hear a lot of bull about abstract, I've listened to the bunkum some of your high-faluting artist pals with hoity-toity English voices talk. God, what crap! Psychological power—message—emotional urge, all of that and a lot I don't begin to understand. Do you know what abstract painting is to me? I'll tell you. It's crazy. It's the excrescence of sick minds. It's a kind of corruption. It's decadence. It's plain bloody laziness, too—daub here, daub there, slap paint here, put it on with your feet, ride a bicycle over the canvas,

swing over it, stand at the kerb and throw the paint anywhere on a board—art? That's about as artistic as my merino sheep. I want to know what I'm looking at. I want a picture I can recognize. I don't want to know what the artist has got to say, I want to know what he's showing me, what he's *seeing*."

Brutus broke off sweating.

Venella turned from the painting, and Lorna stood on one side, much calmer now, her face in repose.

Venella said: "Wow!"

It was like a sound from a long way off, heard clearly and yet carrying no significance.

"So there was this Picasso," Brutus said, half-turning from Mannering. "It was on exhibition at Angus and Watson in Sydney. In a window, how about that? It didn't have a price tag. I stood and looked at it, and then I walked across the road and looked at it from there. I went one way up Pitt Street and walked past it, then I went the other way and walked past it again. I got on top of a bus at rush hour, you can be sure of stopping along there, and I looked down on it. Then I went to my hotel, the Wentworth. They hadn't pulled it down at that time. I dreamt about that bloody picture, and I went back next morning and asked the price. Twenty-five thousand Australian, they said, and I said I would take it away with me."

"Wheeee!" breathed Venella. "Now I know."

Brutus ignored that, passed Mannering and drew up in front of the picture.

"It did something to me," he said. "It took something out of my guts. Don't ask me what. I didn't know why the hell I liked it. Black Day—Black Day my ass! I stuck it on that wall, and went to bed, and didn't think about it until next morning. It was a morning in ten thousand. We had rain.

Did we want rain! We hadn't seen a drop for three years, and we were losing sheep by the hundred each day. We had three families living here because their wells didn't go deep enough. That morning, the clouds came over from the north-west. I've lived in this part of the outback for twenty-five years but I've never seen a sky like it. *Black?* Black's not the word. There was a rainbow. I stood and watched that rainbow when every other man on the station was rushing about, battening things down, closing windows and doors, making sure the horses were in—because we were going to have one hell of a wind. I ought to have been running around with the rest, whereas I was looking at rainbows. Crazy? Everyone thought I had gone mad, including me.

"But I hadn't gone mad," Brutus went on, more slowly, and he approached the painting very closely. "No, I hadn't gone mad. I was seeing something I hadn't ever seen before. That sky was *black*. It was so black it was blacker than night. But there was some colour in it, as if the rainbow had left the colour behind. There was purple, there was blue, there was red, there was orange, there was yellow. *Black?* It had every bloody colour in the world somewhere. Every one was there when I looked for it, and—" Brutus raised his right hand and pointed dramatically at the picture. "It's on there, too. You know what Picasso did with that painting? He captured the sky on one day in ten thousand. He just grabbed himself a square of the thunder in the sky and slapped it on canvas. That's why I bought it. Abstract? Abstract my foot. It was real, it was so real I didn't want to let it go. Every time I look at that picture, I think: One day it's going to rain again. It just has to rain again."

Brutus's voice fell away.

Venella was staring at him with a strange, almost a marvelling expression in her eyes. Lorna slid her arm into

Mannering's, and led him to the big window, where the sunlight took all the colour out of the earth.

It seemed a long time before Brutus turned round, and when he did his expression was very much like Venella's; it was almost enraptured.

"John," he said, "I don't know why I bought that picture. I only know I had to. And I began to want to buy other things. I got the message from that picture, and I came to London to talk to you. If I liked the look of you, if you seemed the kind of man who would give me a square deal, I was going to invite you to Australia—all expenses paid. I was going to ask you to buy some of the things at Melbury House for me. I wanted to know *why* you would think they were worth buying, I wanted to find out if anything there had a message for me, too."

He grinned.

"How do you like being a messenger boy, Mannering?"

Mannering felt as if he had been through a hurricane. There was a kind of breathlessness about him, almost of exhaustion. He was almost sure that, despite that last flippant question, Brutus felt the same; his look of exhaustion was very marked. Venella, the least affected and yet very much aware of what had happened, let out a long slow breath. As if it were sacrilege to speak aloud, she said:

"After that, do I need a drink!" She went and poured one out, standing quite still watching the others. To Mannering she was apart from the three of them—a visible presence which was not felt.

Lorna, her eyes on Brutus, moved very slowly to a chair and sat down.

Brutus looked back at her.

He said: "Well? How did I do?"

He seemed to say: That was for you, that was everything I've got. Tell me it was enough for you.

Mannering felt absolutely sure of a bond between this man and Lorna, and for the first time in his life, he felt afraid. His heart beat with a sickening sense of dread.

Brutus said sharply: "Do I pass?"

Mannering answered: "You pass."

He doubted whether Brutus heard him, for above everything else, the man was listening for Lorna; and Lorna had not spoken.

Brutus caught his breath.

"To hell with you. Where did I go wrong?"

Lorna moistened her lips.

"You didn't go wrong," she said.

"You mean I made sense?"

"You certainly made sense."

"You're not—" he caught his breath again.

"I am not saying this just to please you," Lorna told him, and as if she were suddenly aware of the construction Mannering could put on that, she added quickly: "Why should I?" At last she looked away, her glance avoiding Mannering, resting on the pallid blue sky, the yellow land. "Don't you agree that he made sense, John?"

Mannering made himself say: "If there's any way I can help you to feel for other things what you feel for Black Day, just say so."

Brutus swung round on him.

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean it."

"Of course he means it," Lorna said.

Into a long silence Venella Melbury spoke.

"Have you three ever heard of the earth?"

"What's that?" asked Brutus.

"Earth?" echoed Lorna.

"The place I live on. The place I would like you to come down to, if it won't hurt too much."

Mannering laughed.

"I'm back," he said. "I'm back with a bump."

"Perhaps you didn't go so far away from it," Venella said drily. "I always knew there were hidden depths in Nathaniel. I wish I knew the way to dig down into them. What's the secret, Lorna?"

Secret.

Lorna said: "He has to let you dig, first."

"Let me dig, Nat," Venella pleaded. "Not very deep—just three and a half million pounds deep. John—" there was pleading in her voice. "John, help me dig into him. A man who can talk about a picture like that is ready-made for Melbury House and everything in it. Make him buy everything—the house and all the things in it. You can make him."

"No one can make him," Mannering said.

"Someone made him talk like that."

"What am I?" Brutus asked, and now he sounded less breathless, less tired. "Some anatomical specimen? Some machine you work by putting in a coin?" He laughed. "Melbury House—what's that but a pile of stone filled with old junk?"

Venella poured herself another drink.

"It was a spell someone cast on him," she said. "Just a spell. Tell him it's not just a pile of stone, John."

Mannering said: "There's one trouble with Melbury House."

"So now we're being told the truth," Brutus said.

"Spoil my chances and I'll find a way to cutting your throat," said Venella.

"What trouble?" asked Lorna.

"It's in the wrong place," said Mannering.

Venella frowned. "It's where it always has been. Don't blame me."

"It's too far away from Canberra."

"What's on your mind now?" demanded Brutus.

"John," Lorna said. "Don't tantalize us."

She meant, "Don't tantalize him."

"Darling," Mannering said very softly, "sooner or later he has to think for himself."

Lorna seemed to flinch.

"John," Brutus said, "why Canberra? Why not Sydney or Melbourne or Adelaide, or if it comes to that, why not Perth or Brisbane?"

"You're getting warm," said Mannering.

"I wish I had even the beginning of an idea," said Venella.

"Because it's the capital," Mannering told them quietly. "Because it's the best place in Australia to house the treasures in Melbury House."

"Hey!" cried Venella.

"So they are treasures," Brutus said.

"They are treasures. Do you really want my opinion?"

"I want it."

"Melbury House is the nearest I've seen out of England to a period castle—an Elizabethan castle. The outside is a bit rococo, but inside it has everything—someone who built that place had the same vision as you had with Black Day. Probably the founder didn't quite know what he was doing or why he was doing it, but that doesn't matter. And he and everyone who followed him did a remarkable job. I didn't see a single fake. Every picture there is as real as your Picasso—which was once part of the Collection."

"What?" Brutus cried.

"Please—" began Venella.

"He must be told," Mannering said gruffly. "The picture was on loan from Melbury House, just after your uncle died, but someone authorized the sale. Ralph Melbury. He knew it was not his to sell, but he wanted the money, and the dealers had no reason to doubt his authority. Venella knew you'd been deceived, and weren't a party to the stealing, so she never reported it stolen—thus saving both you and her brother from scandal and unpleasantness."

"My God!" breathed Brutus, but before he could go on, Mannering said in a loud, clear voice:

"Worry about that later. The Melbury Collection is a gem. There aren't fifty men in the world who could afford to do what ought to be done with that place."

Brutus asked in a rough voice: "What ought to be done?"

"It ought to be moved to Canberra. The outside ought to be modernized or else reconstructed to look exactly like Melbury Castle in England. The interior ought to remain exactly as it is. In Canberra, you would draw the crowds. Where it stands now, you can't hope to. And that kind of collection shouldn't be broken up and sent all over the world, or belong to an individual—it should belong to a nation."

Venella said huskily: "The best of the old in the best of the new."

After a long pause, Brutus spoke more naturally.

"That's very interesting, John. That would make me a public benefactor, wouldn't it?"

"There are a hundred ways you can be a public benefactor," Mannering said. "There's only one way you can be one and at the same time satisfy yourself."

Brutus began to smile; and he looked at Lorna.

"You agree?" he asked.

"I haven't seen Melbury House, but if that's what John says, it is probably what I would say, too," Lorna said.

"The perfect wife," Brutus mocked. "You don't know how lucky you are, John." There was no half-sneer with 'John' this time. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll sleep on it. The money that would cost would be half of my lot, and when you're playing with half of what you possess you need a little time to think." After a pause, he said: "That Picasso—"

"Nat," interrupted Venella.

"Yep?"

She was looking pale, and demandingly beautiful, and something in her expression told Mannering that her very heart was in what she was going to say.

"I go with Melbury House," she said. "You don't have to keep me. You can give me away or throw me away, but I go with the house."

"Venella," Brutus said, "I can't see Melbury House without you. If I play, I'll play for keeps." After a long pause, he asked: "Did you know I had your Picasso?"

Slowly, Venella nodded, and then, as if forcing herself to do so, said: "Ralph doesn't go with the house, though. You need to know that."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MIRACLE

MANNERING moved across the bedroom and looked out into the starlit night. He heard Lorna in the bathroom. She would be with him in a few minutes. They had been on their own only at odd moments during the afternoon and early

evening, and now they were together for half-an-hour before dinner. The low-ceilinged room was well proportioned and comfortably furnished; it might have been a room in any modern luxury hotel. There were rich carpets on the polished boards of the floor, good but not outstanding pictures on the wall.

Except for Lorna's movements, there was no sound.

They could have talked together before this but Lorna had shown no desire to do so and Mannering wondered with a sickening sense of apprehension whether he had indeed lost her. At moments he told himself that the very idea was ludicrous; at others—well, she was so deeply preoccupied and withdrawn that he hardly seemed to know her.

She came out of the bathroom, her wrap, usually draped so negligently, pulled tightly round her. She was half-frowning, as she went to the dressing-table.

Mannering said with assumed lightness: "Hi."

"John," Lorna said. "I shouldn't ask this, but I'm going to. You did mean every word, didn't you?"

"What makes you think I might not have?"

"You've tormented yourself and I've tormented you because of what happened at Catesby's. You could be trying to make it up to Brutus."

"Oh," said Mannering. "Balm to his wound."

"Yes."

"You know," Mannering said, judicially, "you're not thinking straight over this."

Lorna stiffened; "Aren't I?"

"The place or the man has cast a spell over you," Mannering said, and added with lightness which concealed his furious anxiety. "In the same way Anthony cast a spell over Cleopatra."

"That was the other way round."

"He had something she desperately wanted," said Mannering.

"And you're suggesting that *Nat* Brutus has something I want?" She was looking at Mannering intently but her cheeks were slightly flushed.

"Yes," said Mannering.

"What on earth—" Lorna began, almost angrily.

"Sweetheart," Mannering said, "you saw something special in Nat Brutus when you first set eyes on him. There couldn't be any other explanation of the way you reacted. He had a quality I didn't see at first but you did. I've seen it now." Slowly, painfully, he went on: "He's about the most vital, virile man I know. He's got the Midas touch, and nothing can ever take that away. He's got something else, too—something you were incredibly quick to recognize."

Lorna's voice was just above a whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he has a sense of perception, a feeling for beauty and antiquity, but something more. He not only *wants* the best, he yearns for it and loves it, in fact he almost worships it. Nothing but the best is good enough. He is that rare creature, the absolute perfectionist, stretching out beyond his own reach and capacity for something he knows exists out of reach." When Lorna didn't speak, he went on: "Don't you agree?"

"Yes," she said, very quietly.

"Melbury House and all that's in it is the best he can do here," Mannering went on.

"If you're sure, then I'm sure."

"He ought to buy it," Mannering said. "But—"

"Yes?"

"He probably won't."

"Why not?"

Very carefully, Mannering said: "Because of you."

"*John!* What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if you were to say to him what Venella said, that you go with Melbury House, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment."

Lorna opened her lips, but didn't speak; she watched Mannering with an expression almost of horror, as if she could not, and yet was forced to, believe this intuitive knowledge.

"You know that's true, don't you?" Mannering went on.

"I—I don't know what to say," said Lorna. "I don't know what to say."

"I shouldn't have asked such a question, yet I had to," Mannering said. "Lorna, will you do something for me?"

"If—if I can."

"I believe you can," Mannering said. "I really believe you can, but that no one else in the world could. After dinner, talk to Brutus, alone. Persuade him to take Melbury House and persuade him to take Venella with it."

Mannering stood up and went across to his wife, bent over her and held out his hands. As she rested hers in his and looked into his eyes, he felt a deadening fear of utter loss.

He said: "I love you so much, so very much. Losing you would be like losing part of me."

It was late.

Somewhere, out in the moonlit grounds, walked Lorna and Nathaniel Brutus. In the big room overlooking the dark land, Mannering sat listening to a Liszt Sonata. At a small table, Venella sat looking through some English magazines.

Dinner had been over for three hours. Then, Brutus had been lively and almost excited, as if stimulated by the challenge. An hour afterwards Lorna had said:

"John, I started a portrait of Brutus this morning." She always said 'Brutus' as if it were a first name.

"Did you?"

"And it's as good as anything Picasso could do," Brutus declared.

"Nonsense. But I'd like to finish it."

That was the way she had made it seem natural for her and Brutus to go off on their own. Mannering wasn't sure whether to be glad or sorry that he didn't know where they were; he only accepted the fact that he felt a gnawing anxiety which grew deeper with every passing minute. Surely it wasn't possible that Lorna could have fallen in love with this man? It couldn't be.

Yet he knew it could.

"John," Venella said.

He didn't hear her.

"John."

He heard. "What's that?"

"You're not a very entertaining companion. Not like you were last night."

"Last night was last night," he said.

"And tonight is different," Venella said. After a pause she went on: "Do you think he'll do what you advise about Melbury?"

"He might."

"Isn't there *any* way you can influence him?"

"No more—no more than I've tried," Mannering said. "How well *do* you know him?"

"I don't think I know him well," Venella admitted reluctantly. "Not really well. In a few minutes Lorna knew him

better than I, who have known him for ten years, and been in love with him practically all that time." As Mannering moved, she said quietly: "Don't worry, I'm not going to embarrass you with a lot of mawkish sentiment, but facts are facts. You know my well-known habit of throwing myself at the head of any attractive man, don't you? Especially if he happens to have something I want. There isn't a way I haven't tried to get Nathaniel. I'll take him on any terms. The worst of it is, he knows it."

She broke off.

There was a movement outside, as two figures moved across the patio. Mannering saw Lorna's face in the light of the room—and she was radiant. His heart seemed to thunder in his ears. Then Brutus appeared, carrying a canvas with great care. Lorna opened the mesh door. Mannering sprang across and opened the glass one, Lorna stood aside and Brutus came in.

He was like a man transformed.

He walked across to the Picasso, rested the canvas on the floor, took Black Day down, and put the canvas in its place. Taking a hammer and some tacks out of his pocket, he tacked the canvas into the wooden wall, corner by corner.

Then he stood back, and said in a penetrating whisper: "That's what I call a miracle!"

And in it's way it was a miracle, for Lorna had captured the very spirit of him, even to the fire which burned in his eyes. It was almost as if the picture lived in him, and he in it.

"My God," Venella breathed.

Mannering thought despairingly: I've lost her.

Then Lorna came to his side, and caught his hand, and passed on a message which drove the fear away. He put his arm round her waist, and felt her yield, as Brutus cried:

"How about that, John? How about it, Venella?" He turned to Venella and caught her hands. "Are you sure the man in that picture is what you want? Because that's the way I am."

One morning two months later, Mannering was in the office behind Quinn's when he heard Lorna's voice. Immediately he pushed aside the papers in front of him, waiting for her to come. Bright with excitement, her cheeks flushed, her eyes alight, she thrust her face forward for a kiss.

"John, they're married!"

"They—*oh!* Venella and Nathaniel?"

"Yes," Lorna said, opening a crocodile handbag and taking out a folded cablegram. "Yesterday, at Melbury House—but look." There was something else she hadn't yet told him, something she wanted him to read for himself.

The first words made him chuckle.

> Hallo, miracle workers. First stone moved from here to site near War Museum Canberra today. Great enthusiasm everywhere. Every newspaper calls me a public benefactor. Make a date twelve months from today for official opening Sport. We will kill the fatted sheep for you. Oh, yes, Venella and I were married by the side of the hole in the wall made by taking away the first stone. No wedding gifts by request. Goodbye miracle workers. Signed: The Living Miracle.

By the time he had finished, Mannering was laughing.

A minute or two later, he was saying:

"I've just been going through Toby Plender's settlement of the Duke of Alda affair. The *Globe's* apologized and paid five thousand pounds to a named charity, and I'm to pay the

same to any charity I wish. The Duchy accepts it as a misunderstanding, and will continue to use me to sell for them."

"Happy about it?" Lorna asked.

"Perfectly happy."

"As a topic of interest the whole affair soon died down in the newspapers. I doubt if anyone thought twice about it," Lorna said. "Though at the time I felt it was a tragedy."

"At the time," Mannering said, "it almost threatened to be." He was smiling a little tensely as he went on: "Do you ever wish you'd stayed in Australia?"

"Not for a moment," Lorna said. "But—"

"But?"

"I'm very glad we went," Lorna said. "In a strange way it started us on a new life." After a moment she went on, laughing rather shyly: "Shouldn't I have said that?"

"It needed saying," Mannering said. "It needed saying. I only hope we never have to say it again."

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